

BOMBA The Jungle Boy

AMONG THE SLAVES



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By ROY ROCKWOOD

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE WHIZZING ARROWS . . .	I
II. A DIVE FOR SAFETY . . .	11
III. DEEP MYSTERY . . .	22
IV. IN THE QUAGMIRE . . .	31
V. IN THE NICK OF TIME . .	38
VI. FULL OF MENACE . . .	45
VII. A STRANGE PROPHECY . .	55
VIII. DRIVEN BACK . . .	67
IX. STARTLING NEWS . . .	77
X. ON THE TRAIL . . .	86
XI. THE PUMA SPRINGS . . .	93
XII. IN THE TOILS . . .	103
XIII. A HIDEOUS FOE . . .	111
XIV. THE WHIRLING KNIFE . .	121
XV. THE DREADFUL VALLEY . .	129
XVI. A STROKE FOR FREEDOM . .	137
XVII. MAN OR DEMON . . .	147
XVIII. AN ASTONISHING STATEMENT .	156
XIX. BEWILDERMENT . . .	162
XX. TORTURE . . .	171

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXI.	THE MUTTERING OF THE STORM	178
XXII.	A DARING VENTURE . . .	186
XXIII.	IN FLIGHT	191
XXIV.	PURSUED	196
XXV.	VICTORY	202

BOMBA THE JUNGLE BOY
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CHAPTER I

THE WHIZZING ARROWS

CRACK! The report of a rifle echoed through the jungle.

A tapir, browsing at the edge of a clearing, gave a convulsive start and then sank slowly to the ground.

On its brown skin in the vicinity of the heart appeared a red stain that gradually widened. The stricken beast rolled over on its side and lay still.

There was a crackling of the underbrush and a lithe figure leaped into the clearing and ran to the side of the tapir. The still smoking rifle held in the right hand betokened the source of the shot that had brought the quarry low.

Bomba, the jungle boy, bent over the animal and assured himself that no other shot was

needed. Then he straightened up with a smile of satisfaction.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "The white man's fire stick kills as surely and quickly as the arrows of Bomba. But it speaks with a voice of thunder, while the arrows sing softly. It is not well to make too much noise in the jungle."

His keen eyes searched the vicinity to see what thing, if any, had been aroused by the report of the rifle.

He formed a striking picture as he stood at the edge of the clearing with a glint of sunshine that had sifted through the trees lighting up his bronzed face, a face so tanned by exposure to sun and wind and storm that at first sight it might have been mistaken for that of a native.

But a moment's scrutiny would have dispelled that impression. For the features were undeniably those of a white boy. They were strongly though finely chiseled, the nose aquiline, the mouth firm and handsome, the brow broad and high. Keen intelligence looked through the large brown eyes. The head was magnificently shaped and covered with a mass of wavy brown hair.

The boy's muscular development was remarkable and the rippling ridges on arms and legs marked the athlete. Grace showed in every movement. He wore no clothing except the tunic

common to the jungle and a puma skin stretched across his breast—the skin of Geluk, the giant puma that Bomba had slain when the brute was attacking the parrots, Woowoo and Kiki, two of the boy's feathered friends. Sandals shod his feet.

Besides the rifle he carried in his hands, his weapons consisted of a bow slung over his shoulder and a quiver of arrows at his side, together with the machete that was thrust in his belt—a knife nearly a foot long with a razor edge that could do deadly execution in hand to hand combat or when hurled through the air by the lad's powerful arm.

The rifle was a recent acquisition. It had been given to Bomba by a party of three white scientists with whom Bomba had come in contact in the jungle and whose adventures are recorded in the volume immediately preceding this. With the weapon they had left a plentiful supply of cartridges. For this the boy was grateful, but he was still more thankful for the fact that under the treatment of these wise white men, Cody Casson, Bomba's only white associate in the jungle, was slowly but surely recovering his mind, which had been affected by an accident.

The rifle was new to Bomba, who, up to that time, had been compelled to fight wild beasts and savage men with arrow and knife, in the use of

both of which he was wonderfully efficient. True, Bomba had at one time owned a revolver given him by two rubber hunters, Ralph Gillis and Jake Dorn, whom he had met in the jungle and whom he had aided in a time of danger. But the revolver was a feeble weapon against the jungle beasts as compared with this modern rifle Bomba now possessed, or even as compared with the bow and arrows and the machete when used by this jungle-bred lad.

He drew his knife from his belt and set about skinning the tapir.

"There will be rejoicing in the maloca of Honduras when Bomba takes back his meat," he said to himself. "Pipina, the squaw, will be glad that she can make fresh broth for Casson."

With deft strokes he removed the hide from one side of the beast. Then he rolled the body over to continue the operation.

He stretched himself to relieve his cramped limbs and then bent again over the carcass. As he did so, several arrows whizzed over his head. If he had still been in a standing position, he would have been transfixed.

Like lightning, Bomba flung himself into the underbrush that bordered the edge of the clearing. Then, as swiftly and sinuously as a snake, he wormed his way into the tangled depths of the jungle.

There had been no signs that hostile natives were in that part of the jungle. From time to time raiding parties from distant tribes invaded that section, leaving a trail of blood and flame and death. More than once Bomba had come in contact with these invaders and had had to fight for his life. But now for many months there had been peace in the vicinity of the Araos, the tribe whose leader, Hondura, was a firm friend of Bomba.

As silently as a shadow, Bomba made his way through the undergrowth until he was at some distance from the scene of the attack. Then, when he was beyond the sight of prying enemies, he forsook the ground for the air. He knew that his foes could track him through the brush. But the air left no traces.

So he swung himself up to the bough of a tree and passed from branch to branch, from tree to tree, with the agility of a monkey. He kept this up for a considerable time and then his flight halted.

For he had no idea of fleeing indefinitely. All that he had wanted to do was to keep out of the way of his enemies until he could form his own plan of campaign, learn the numbers and plans of his foes, and then take measures to thwart or defeat them.

With his swiftness of foot and the jungle ex-

perience he had gained, he could easily have out-distanced them and secured his own safety. But it was not of his own safety he was thinking.

For there was the tribe of the Araos to whom he was bound in closest ties of friendship, the good chief, Hondura, his little daughter Pirah, the unsuspecting natives, men, squaws and children, Casson himself, all unknowing of the presence of savage raiders in their neighborhood. They must be warned. Bomba must learn the full nature and extent of the threatening danger.

He described a wide circle, and then, with all the caution of a panther stalking its prey, he approached again the place where he had left the body of the tapir.

Drifting along like a ghost, taking advantage of every tree and bush that might screen his movements, he had progressed for half a mile when he came to an abrupt stop.

He had seen nothing, heard nothing to arouse his suspicions. But his nostrils were almost as keen as those of the animals of the jungle and he had caught the human scent.

With dilated nostrils he sniffed the air, and, having located the direction from which the scent was coming, he moved stealthily toward the objects of his search with every sense on the alert.

He was not long in finding them. Not more than five minutes had elapsed before he glimpsed

two brawny forms squatting at the foot of a tree some fifty yards ahead.

Instantly he dropped to his knees and worked his way through the tangle of brush that intervened. When he was near enough to see and hear clearly he lay flat on the ground and peered through a slight opening in a thicket.

The men whom his eyes lighted on had tall, muscular forms and brutish, evil faces. Above their low brows rose headdresses of feathers, and rude symbols were daubed in red paint upon their breasts.

A thrill ran through Bomba's veins as he recognized those symbols. These were the marks of the dreaded headhunters, those fiends in human form that dwelt beyond the Giant Cataract!

But his eyes dwelt lightly upon their forms and faces. They looked rather with a shudder of repulsion at the horrid trophies that hung at the warriors' belts.

Human heads! One the head of a man, the other that of a woman, as shown by the long locks. Human heads freshly lopped off, for from them the blood still oozed. Relics perhaps of the inmates of some little hut in the jungle to which the headhunters had come that very day. Pitiful, terrible to look at, gruesome, but trophies in which the savage hunters took great pride and

which were destined to ornament the roofs of their wigwams in their far distant haunts.

The temptation was strong to Bomba to avenge at once the victims of the headhunters by sending a couple of arrows through the hearts of the evil brutes who had severed these heads. He could have done it easily, and the savages would have been dead without knowing what had struck them.

But Bomba held his hand. There must be other headhunters about, scores of them in all probability, for they would never have come such a distance except in strong force. What good in ridding the world of two when their places would be immediately taken by others? He must use craft rather than weapons.

He had no delusions about the terrible enemies he had to deal with. Their name was a terror in all that region. Twice before in Bomba's memory they had invaded that section of the jungle in which he dwelt and he had been forced to battle with them for his life and Casson's. Each time he had been successful; but he had no assurance that his good fortune would continue.

He strained his ears, for now the men were talking. Bomba knew most of the native dialects and had no trouble in understanding what was said.

"It is long since we left our village," said one of the warriors, as he ran his hands almost caressingly through the hair of the head that hung at his belt, "and Motulu will be glad once more when he hears the roar of the cataract and sees the sun shining on the roof of his wigwam."

"Motulu speaks well," replied the other. "Mambu, too, is weary and would return. Why should Nascanora tarry here longer? His warriors have taken many heads and shed much blood. Surely Nascanora should be satisfied."

Motulu looked around cautiously before he answered.

"Nascanora will never be satisfied," he said, "until he has the head of the white boy to adorn his wigwam. He has sworn by the gods that he will not return to the village until he can carry it at his belt. Then only can Nascanora sleep well."

Bomba knew only too well who the "white boy" was whose head was so ardently desired by the chief of the headhunters.

A dubious look came into Mambu's face.

"The white boy is hard to catch," he said. "He is as cunning as a snake and as brave as the puma. Does Motulu not remember how he faced Nascanora and dared him to fight him with knives? And how, when he was escaping from the village, he sank the haft of his machete into

Nascanora's face, so that blackness came over Nascanora's eyes and he fell as one who is dead? It is in the mind of Mambu that the white boy is under the protection of his gods and cannot be hurt. It would be well if Nascanora sought the white boy no longer, but returned to the lands of the tribe."

"Let not Nascanora hear that Mambu has spoken thus," warned Motulu, "or Mambu's tongue will be torn out by the roots so that he can speak no more. Listen! He is coming!"

The men sprang to their feet in an attitude of attention, a great club in the left hand of each and a spear in the right.

There was a trampling in the brush and the sound of guttural voices.

Bomba burrowed still more deeply into the recesses of the thicket, covering himself with dead leaves in the process so as to resemble the earth on which he lay.

The tread of feet came nearer. Then the bushes parted and a great, hideously painted savage strode into the clearing.

CHAPTER II

A DIVE FOR SAFETY

"NASCANORA!" breathed Bomba to himself, as his eyes fell upon that menacing figure.

A thrill went through the lad at the recognition. There were the haughty bearing, the hawk-like eyes, the wicked mouth, the features ingrained with cruelty that he remembered so well. The Nascanora who had led his warriors at the siege of the cabin that the boy was defending! The Nascanora who had threatened him with fiendish tortures on the Island of Snakes! The Nascanora who had carried him captive to the tribal village near the Giant Cataract!

The same and yet not the same. The same in cruelty and brutishness, but not the same in appearance. For the upper part of the nose had been crushed in and the face was hideous. The wound had long since healed, but the disfigurement remained, a vivid reminder to Bomba of that night when he had driven the handle of his knife into the chief's face and felled him like an ox.

He knew only too well what fate awaited him if he should ever fall into the clutches of the savage whose face he had thus marred.

The chief was evidently in a bad humor. His brows were drawn together in a frown and his eyes glowed like coals of fire.

Behind Nascanora came a troop of his followers, walking gingerly and casting furtive glances at their leader as though each were hoping that not upon him would fall the weight of their chief's displeasure.

"You are dogs!" cried Nascanora, wheeling about as he reached the center of the clearing, while his glittering eyes went from one to another of his warriors. "You are not worthy to serve Nascanora. You have the white boy within your reach and you let him go. You shoot at him and your arrows miss. You pursue him and cannot catch him. The white boy laughs at the braves of Nascanora. He mocks them as if they were squaws."

Nascanora's men stood without a word under this berating, not one of them daring to lift his eyes.

At last the medicine man, whose sacred office gave him some degree of immunity and in whom Bomba recognized his old enemy, Ruspak, ventured to speak.

"Let not Nascanora be angry," he said placat-

ingly. "The white boy is as cunning as a weasel, yet even a weasel may be captured at last. It is strong magic that is brewed by the white boy and the white-haired old wizard with whom he lives. But Ruspak's magic is still stronger and it will put the white boy in Nascanora's hands. It may not be to-day and it may not be to-morrow, but Nascanora shall yet hear the white boy scream under the torture."

The only answer to this was an angry grunt. It was clear that the chief's confidence in his medicine man's powers had not been strengthened by recent events.

"Let food be made ready," ordered Nascanora, as he flung himself down at the foot of a tree.

He sat with his knees drawn up, his face like a thundercloud while the warriors hurried about gathering brush and wood for the fire to cook their supper.

Bomba noted with a wry face that they had brought with them for their meal the choicest portions from the tapir that he himself had killed. No broth would be made from that meat for Casson.

But his thoughts soon took another turn. There was not enough brush and twigs in the clearing itself for the fire, and the dusky warriors spread out to gather more in the surrounding

forest. At any moment one might stumble over him.

It was too late to move, for the slightest motion would be instantly discerned. He must await events and take his chance.

He held his breath as the padding footsteps came nearer. The leaves with which he had covered himself offered a good protection from prying eyes. But if one of the savages should stumble over his prone body—

Several minutes passed without detection, and Bomba was beginning to breathe more easily when a foot prodded him in the ribs with such force that the owner of that foot had all he could do to retain his balance. He started back with a grunt of surprise.

Then the surprise changed into swift suspicion. The contact had dislodged some of the leaves and the savage caught a glimpse of the boy's brown skin.

A yell rose from the fellow's throat that was checked almost instantly. For with the speed of light Bomba leaped to his feet and drove his fist into the warrior's jaw.

But the yell and the sudden movement had done their work. In a second the camp was in wild excitement. The savages grasped their spears and their bows and, led by Nascanora himself, rushed toward Bomba.

The lad turned and ran for his life.

While the jungle boy is making his way through the tangle of trees and brush with the demoniac yells of his pursuers ringing in his ears, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series, to tell who Bomba is and what have been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Bomba had no memory of his parents. From his earliest consciousness he had lived in a cabin in the depths of the Amazonian jungle under the care of Cody Casson, a frail, white-haired old naturalist who for some reason had cut himself loose from civilization and buried himself with his youthful charge in the wilderness. There they lived supported by hunting and fishing. The tribes in the immediate vicinity were friendly enough, but a superstitious belief that the mysterious white man was a weaver of spells and magic made them hold aloof from any close intercourse.

Casson, though kind and affectionate toward Bomba, was immersed in his own dreams and moods and sometimes days passed without a word between the two except monosyllables. He, however, gave Bomba the rudiments of education so that the lad had some knowledge of the English language.

Left largely to his own devices and living almost wholly an outdoor life, Bomba early

learned to depend upon himself. He became expert in the use of bow and arrow and the knife and did his full share in the hunting of game with which the cabin was supplied.

He often asked Casson to tell him something about his parents, and the old man promised to do so when the lad should be old enough to understand. But while the jungle boy was still a mere child an accident occurred to Casson that rendered him comparatively helpless, at the same time injuring his brain, and from that time on he lived in a mental haze. Bomba's education stopped at once, and thereafter the care of the little household devolved entirely upon the lad.

Thrown on his own resources, Bomba became a mighty hunter, the greatest in all that section of the jungle. At fourteen his muscles were as powerful as those of a full-grown athlete and he had never yet faced an emergency to which he had not proved equal.

Yet, though he found delight in battle, the boy was lonely and unhappy. His loneliness was intolerable. His only companions, outside of Casson, were the more harmless birds and animals, with whom he talked frequently and over whom he had a strange power. He understood them, and in a way that was almost uncanny they seemed to understand and sympathize with him.

He tried repeatedly to get from Casson some

facts that would put him on the track of his parents. But the old man, although he tried desperately to help the lad, could not remember. At times disjointed words and names and sentences would come from his lips, but then the veil of darkness would come back over his mind and he could go no further. All that Bomba had been able to glean was that his father's name was Andrew Bartow and his mother's name Laura. Beyond this he knew nothing.

When Bomba was about fourteen years old, Nascanora and his headhunters invaded that section of the jungle in which he lived. He singled out Bomba and Casson for his especial wrath because he believed that Casson's magic had brought the plague to his people. What desperate straits Bomba found himself in when the cabin was besieged by the headhunters, the gallant and successful defense he made, the craft and courage that finally gave him the victory are told in the first volume of this series, entitled: "Bomba the Jungle Boy."

Following the retreat of the savages, Casson told Bomba that, though he himself could not remember the facts about the boy's parents, those facts were known to Jojasta, the Medicine Man of the Moving Mountain, and that Bomba could get the information from him. Although Jojasta had a name that struck terror because of

his cruelty and ferocity, Bomba resolved to seek him out. His journey was beset with countless perils from man and beast, but Bomba surmounted them and reached the palace of Jojasta. He did not get the information for which he sought, but he learned that Sobrinini, the witch woman, who dwelt beyond the Giant Cataract could probably tell him what he wanted so much to know.

Sorely disappointed, but yet undaunted, Bomba set out in quest of Sobrinini. He fought his way through terrible dangers and finally found the old woman on her Island of Snakes. She, who had formerly been a brilliant European opera singer, now, half-crazed, ruled over her horrible kingdom.

Sobrinini furnished no solution of Bomba's problem. He did, it is true, discover on the Island of Snakes a picture which he believed was that of his unknown mother, and Sobrinini hinted to him that Japazy, the half-breed of Jaguar Island, held the key to the mystery of his birth.

To Jaguar Island—so named because of the ferocious beasts that infested it—Bomba therefore journeyed, only to find that Japazy was absent at the time on a visit to the Abandoned City. He decided to remain until the return of that potentate. But the people of the island, thinking thus to please their absent master,

planned to offer up Bomba as a sacrifice to their gods. It was only by the exercise of the utmost craft and courage that Bomba was able to escape this doom.

One of these Indians, however, Gibo, was rescued from a terrible fate by Bomba, to whom the man became devotedly attached. Together they sought out Japazy in the Abandoned City—a great metropolis of ancient times long lost and forgotten by most men.

Fighting their way through tremendous dangers, Bomba and Gibo at last found Japazy and the former stated his errand. Japazy, a cruel monster, told Bomba that he, Japazy had slain both of Bomba's parents and that the same fate, accompanied by terrible torture, would be visited on Bomba himself. But the lad overpowered the tyrant's guards and effected his escape.

Among Japazy's possessions Bomba found a small book written in script in a strange language, which he thought might be a diary of the half-breed and contain some information about the jungle boy's parents. He did not wholly believe Japazy's story of the slaying. Bomba hoped that Casson, who had been a notable scholar in his day, would be able to decipher the book. Unluckily Bomba fell into the hands of enemies, and part of the precious book was lost before he could escape.

Bomba shortly afterward came in contact with a party of white men, scientists and physicians, who were exploring the jungle for rare herbs. He saved the life of one of them when attacked by a jaguar and they took a great interest in the strange jungle lad. Their leader learned of Casson's plight, visited and examined the old naturalist and told Bomba that a certain curious plant, if it could be obtained, might effect a cure. But that plant grew only in the Swamp of Death, a weird, uncanny district where dwelt a ferocious tribe, the Abaragos.

How Bomba organized and led an expedition to that awful swamp, the perils he underwent from savage beasts and reptiles, how at the peril of his life he obtained the mysterious plants, defeated the fierce Abaragos and won his way back to the maloca of Hondura, are narrated in the preceding volume of this series, entitled: "Bomba the Jungle Boy in the Swamp of Death."

Now to return to Bomba, as, with the savage headhunters on his track, he fled through the jungle.

Arrows whistled about him, but the hurried aim of his pursuers made them go wild. A spear hurled by one of the savages grazed his shoulder. A stinging, stabbing pain ran the length of his arm, but he kept on without a moment's faltering.

On came his pursuers like a pack of wolves. Their cries of triumph rang through the jungle. The white boy who had baffled them so often was theirs at last!

Before Bomba loomed up two rocks with an opening between them that seemed scarcely wide enough to permit the passage of a human body.

At that opening Bomba halted for a second, then dived into the aperture. But he did not emerge at the other side.

One moment he was clearly visible to his enemies. The next moment he had vanished from sight, melted apparently into mist!

CHAPTER III

DEEP MYSTERY

HOT on Bomba's heels came Nascanora and his braves with their ululating shouts of triumph. At the time the jungle boy plunged through the opening in the rocks his pursuers were not more than twenty yards behind him.

There had been no more arrows shot or spears hurled after that first attack of the startled savages. Nascanora had shouted that the boy must be taken alive. It was not a quick and easy death that the chief had in mind for Bomba. It must be a death drawn out as long as the lad could endure fiendish torture.

There was wild and excited chattering as the savages paused at the opening between the rocks. There was nothing to obscure their sight as they looked through to the other side. Had Bomba gone through he would have been clearly visible as he pursued his flight.

Nascanora and his braves hurried through the passage. There were no footprints on the ground beyond. No crackling of the jungle brush be-

spoke running feet. No tree was near with branches lying so low that the boy could have swung himself into it.

One instant he had been in plain sight. The next, he had disappeared as at the touch of a magician's wand!

Mystified beyond conception, the savages retraced their steps through the passage. On either side was a massive, towering rock. In neither of these was there any opening in which one could cower. The stone floor of the passage was continuous, worn smooth by wind and rain, covered by a light dust that had sifted in from the jungle.

The headhunters looked at each other in consternation. This was something wholly outside their experience. In their dusky features could be seen the workings of superstition.

The chief himself was in a frenzy of rage. To be balked of his prey at the moment he was about to seize it angered him beyond all bearing. He stalked to and fro, muttering and shaking his spear, while his followers shrank from his anger-filled eyes.

"Whither has the white boy gone?" he demanded, turning to his medicine man. "Tell me, Ruspak. You who say that you have wisdom from the gods. Has he sunk into the earth? Has he flown into the air? Whither has he gone?"

The crafty Ruspak, thus appealed to, assumed a mysterious expression and sparred for time.

"The gods know all things, but sometimes they spread a veil over the minds of their servants for a time," he replied. "Perhaps they would be entreated. Perhaps Nascanora and his people have been too slow in the payment of tithes, in the bringing of offerings, in listening to the words of their servant, Ruspak. But let Nascanora be of good comfort. Ruspak will make strong medicine and make incantations to his gods. Then will they reveal to Ruspak whither the white boy has gone."

A bitter response was trembling on the chieftain's lips, but by a great effort he restrained it. Powerful as he was, he did not dare insult the representative of the gods. His own followers might have turned upon him for the sacrilege.

He left some of his warriors to stand guard about the place in the unlikely event of the lad's reappearance and then, followed by the rest, strode angrily back to the interrupted meal.

Every word of this excited dialogue had come, though faintly, to the ears of Bomba. In all that time his would-be murderers had not been ten feet away from him!

A few months before, he had come upon these two rocks, standing like sentinels in the jungle. Wearied with the chase, he had stretched him-

self on the floor of the stone passage between them.

Tapping idly on the stone, he had noticed that it gave forth a curious, hollow sound. His habit of close observation, fostered by long experience in the jungle where the slightest thing might spell the difference between life and death, led him to seek an explanation.

Brushing away the dust, his keen eyes could trace an almost invisible line that, as he followed it, made an almost perfect circle.

He took his knife from his belt and inserted it in a place where the line was slightly broader than at other points. Exerting his strength, he found that the stone yielded slightly.

Keenly interested now, he redoubled his efforts and finally was able to dislodge that part of the floor included in the circle. It proved to be a slab covering a yawning, black hole about six feet deep.

Bomba had explored the opening and found that it led into a cave that seemed to stretch back far into the jungle. At a considerable distance the boy had come up against what seemed to be a solid wall. Apparently there was no other exit.

He returned to the opening and studied the slab that served to close the entrance. Its shape and the cunning skill with which it had been made to fit exactly into the floor of the passage showed

that it was no mere freak of nature but that it had been designed by human brains and hands. Perhaps it had been some place of worship in far distant times, some shrine where native priests had offered sacrifices. The hole might have been used as a receptacle for the bones of the victims.

But no such grisly thoughts disturbed Bomba's exultation over his discovery. It was enough that he knew of a refuge wholly unknown to any other living being.

It was in a part of the jungle believed by the natives of that region to be haunted. They, in consequence, gave it a wide berth. So Bomba knew that, even if he left the hole uncovered, there was no likelihood that it would ever be discovered.

He had placed the slab therefore at the side of the hole, slightly tilted, so that it could be easily grasped and slipped into place. Then he had gone his way and in the course of time had almost forgotten it.

It had come to him like lightning, however, when he had started his flight, pursued by the headhunters. He was thankful that it happened to be so near at hand. His flying feet had turned in that direction.

His mind was in a tumult as he ran. Suppose the hole was not uncovered! Suppose that the heavy paws of some wandering jaguar or puma

had pushed the cover into place! There would be no time to pry the slab out and replace it before his enemies should be upon him.

But as he neared it he saw the gaping opening. With the speed of light he had flung himself into it. Then in one motion he had reached up and pulled the slab into place.

With beating heart, he crouched beneath it. Would he be discovered? Would the eyes of his enemies detect that almost invisible line and guess the truth?

If it had been broad daylight, they might have done so. But in the gathering twilight the line continued to be invisible.

Bomba heard the tumultuous chattering, the thud of feet as his enemies passed over his head, the colloquy between Nascanora and Ruspak. His heart swelled with jubilation as he concluded that they had dismissed the chase for the present as hopeless and were about to return to their fire.

But it sank again when he heard Nascanora appoint sentries and give directions to watch through the night.

Had they all retired, it would have been an easy thing for him, under cover of the darkness, to lift the slab and disappear into the jungle. Then he would have made his way to the maloca of Hondura and put the friendly tribe on its guard.

That was now impossible. The slightest move-

ment of the stone, and the sentries would be on the alert, ready to slay or capture him the moment his head emerged.

For the moment he seemed to have escaped. But had he really escaped? Had he not simply exchanged one form of dying for another? Had he not thrust his head into the jaws of death?

He knew that there would not be air enough in that cavern to maintain life very long. With every moment that passed it would grow fouler. His lungs would soon be laboring, his breath coming with more and more effort. He was in a place that was hermetically sealed. He would choke to death for want of air.

That is, unless there was indeed another exit from the cave! This he resolved to find out at once.

He felt of his wounded shoulder. It pained him considerably, but his exploring fingers told him that it was only a slight flesh wound that had been inflicted. He daubed it with some damp earth from the floor of the cave and its coolness brought relief. Then he set out on his almost hopeless journey.

In places the passage was so narrow that he could squeeze through only with the greatest difficulty. In others it widened and facilitated his progress.

He emerged from the passage into a cave al-

most circular in shape and about ten feet in diameter. In the darkness he tramped over it until his feet had trodden every foot of it. Then he breathed a sight of relief.

For all through that nightmare journey he had been tormented by the thought that perhaps some huge snake, a python or an anaconda, had chosen the place as its den. It would have been an ideal retreat for such a monster, and it was quite within the possibilities that one such, gliding through the jungle, had seen the open hole, explored it, and had there taken up its quarters.

But there was no living inmate of the place. If Bomba were doomed to die, he would die alone.

The lad began a careful investigation of the walls, pounding them with his fists as he moved slowly along, hoping to discover some crevice, some opening, that might furnish an exit to the outer world, or at least to find some spot that by its hollow sound might indicate that the wall could be broken through.

His first circuit of the walls gave him no gleam of hope. They were of earth, but apparently of impregnable thickness. No place seemed thinner than any other. For all he knew, they might have solid earth for hundreds or thousands of feet behind them.

He was trapped, Bomba told himself bitterly,

encased in a living tomb. Death had laid its skeleton hand upon him.

Against this, however, he could have steeled himself. But intolerable anguish lay in the thought that now he could not warn his friends against the presence of the headhunters. Those dreaded fiends would take the village of Hondura by surprise, burn it to the ground, kill the men and those of the women and children that were not carried away captive. His good friend, Hondura, little Pirah, dear old Casson!

Bomba shuddered as he thought of them in the hands of those yelling demons.

But he would not despair. He was not dead yet. He would fight till the last gasp.

There was a mere chance, a thousand-to-one chance, but still a chance of breaking through those walls.

No place seemed to offer more promise than any other. He chose a spot at random.

Seizing his machete, he dug away at the wall with frenzied energy.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE QUAGMIRE

WITH all the power of his muscular arms, Bomba drove his knife into the yielding earth. One thing that gave him cheer was that nowhere did he encounter rock. That would have ruined his knife and extinguished his hopes.

He soon dislodged what seemed tons of earth and was steadily working himself into the wall. Still there seemed to be no end to his endeavors.

He was dripping with perspiration from head to foot because of his terrible exertions. Every muscle of his body ached excruciatingly. His lungs were laboring as though they would burst.

Yet he kept on doggedly, although his head was reeling, his eyes dimming. By this time the air had become very oppressive. Vitality was leaving it. With every breath that Bomba drew he knew that he was diminishing the reservoir that still remained. That reservoir could not be replenished. It would soon be empty and then—death!

At last the moment came when his exhausted

muscles refused to do his bidding. The will was there, but the strength had gone. His arms felt as though each weighed a ton. He could scarcely lift them. His powerful strokes had become gentle taps that scarcely dislodged a fragment of earth.

With one last savage spurt he drove his knife into the wall and sank down utterly exhausted. He had fought to the limit of his strength.

This then, he told himself, was the end. His head was whirling. He fought desperately to keep his senses from leaving him.

Something stole across his forehead, stirred his damp hair, something cooling, almost caressing.

It stirred Bomba from the lethargy that was closing in upon him. He lifted his head.

There it was again, still cooler, more caressing.

Air! Air! The blessed air! There it came again like a reviving draft!

He staggered to his feet and pulled out his knife. Now he felt the current more strongly! That last savage lunge had broken through the wall!

Bomba's heart leaped with renewed hope. He was too weak at the moment to renew his labors, but he thrust his face into the aperture made by the knife and drank in the air in great drafts as though he could never have enough. As he

breathed deeply, the mists cleared from his brain and new life surged through his veins.

He waited till he grew stronger, then again resumed his hacking with the knife. The aperture was quickly enlarged. It was soon big enough to permit Bomba to push his body through.

He found himself in a vast expanse that seemed almost unlimited compared with the cramped confines of the first cavern. His eyes did not tell him this, for it was still utterly dark, but he confirmed his impression by calling out. It was some time before the echoes of his voice came back.

The unbreathed air was fresh and sweet. It would be a long time before Bomba could exhaust it, even if it were not replenished from some source.

But Bomba knew that it would be replenished, that it was being renewed at that very moment. For the air was not dead and sodden. He could feel little currents and cross currents which told him that somewhere new air was sifting in from the outside world. At some places there must be openings through the crust.

And where air came in light would also come. Once more Bomba would see the sun, that blessed sun from which he had thought himself forever severed.

But that would not come till dawn. Bomba made a quick calculation. The darkness had been

gathering when he escaped from the headhunters. He had worked for many hours at digging his way out of his refuge. He figured that now it was about midnight. It would be four or five hours before daybreak. Until that time, or nearly that, he would rest. And if ever a tried and tortured body needed rest, it was that of the jungle boy.

He had no fear of over-sleeping. He had disciplined himself so that he could awake at any moment he had determined upon. So, with a command to his subconscious mind to wake him an hour before dawn, he threw himself down and in an instant was fast asleep.

He woke, as he expected, in utter darkness. He had some remnants of cured meat in his pouch, and with these he made a simple but strengthening meal. Then he sat down with his eyes searching in every direction for the first gleam of light.

Gradually the blackness that surrounded Bomba seemed to grow less thick. There were no glints of light apparent, but it was as though one fold of a thick blanket had been lifted. Soon another fold was lifted and Bomba's eyes could see the ghostly outlines of objects a few feet away.

Then a shout came from the boy's lips as he distinctly caught sight of a luminous spot in the distance. It grew brighter until it revealed itself as a ray of sunlight.

Bomba sprang to his feet and eagerly made his way toward it. He found his way obstructed by a number of fallen trees through whose branches and over whose trunks he could move but slowly. He conjectured that an earthquake had occurred some time at the spot and had thrown the trees into a gulf over which the earth had again closed, leaving only such little rifts as those toward which he was hastening.

Reaching the spot at last, he saw that the light was coming through a mass of tangled roots that spread out in every direction. He had to hack his way through a number of these before he could reach the aperture.

It was large enough to let his arm through but not his body. His knife, however, soon remedied this. Then, grasping the sides of the hole with both hands, Bomba swung himself up on the earth at the foot of the tree.

He had escaped from what had promised to be a living tomb!

A heavy thicket was close at hand. Into this the boy made his way until he knew that he was sheltered from observation. Only then did he dare take a long breath and look around him.

How far he was from the place where he had eluded the pursuit of the headhunters, he had no way of knowing. He had traversed what seemed to be a long way underground, but it might have

seemed longer than it was because of the difficulties of the way and the time he had taken to travel it.

Nothing in human form was visible, but at some little distance he could detect a tenuous thread of smoke rising over the treetops. He knew what that indicated. The warriors of Nascanora were busy in preparing their morning meal.

This gave him at once anxiety and satisfaction. Anxiety because of their close proximity. Satisfaction because it showed that they had not already departed to attack the village of Hondura. He would still be able to reach his friends in time to warn them.

But there was no time to be lost, especially as he could not make his way straight to the maloca. He would have to make a long swing around the circle in order to escape the vigilance of his foes.

Stealthily as a snake, he wormed his way through the underbrush. Once he stopped abruptly as he caught sight of one of the headhunters gathering additional wood for the fire. He lay rigid until the savage, with his arms full, disappeared in the direction of Nascanora's camp.

Bomba resumed his journey and crept on until he was far enough away from the headhunters to feel safe in rising to his feet. Then, at the top of his speed, he raced through the jungle.

He had not gone far before his attention was

arrested by an unusual number of vultures circling about in the sky. He studied them anxiously. What had brought such a company of the scavengers of the air together?

Was slaughter afoot and were they hastening to the feast? Had the smoke he had seen represented only a handful of Nascanora's warriors while their leader with his main force had attacked the people of Hondura?

Engrossed in his study of the vultures, Bomba had for the moment neglected to notice where he was placing his feet. He came to a knowledge of that neglect when he felt himself falling into space.

He did not fall far. He came down splashing into a welter of water and mud, in which he was imbedded to a depth halfway between his knees and his waist.

He tried to scramble out, but could not. He was held as in a vise.

Then he realized what had happened.

He was in the grip of a quagmire, that relentless, insensate monster that so seldom releases its victims!

CHAPTER V

IN THE NICK OF TIME

IN the shock of surprise that came to Bomba when he felt himself falling from the bank into the quagmire he tried to recover himself, but his flounderings only carried him toward the center of that deadly patch of muck.

As he brushed aside the mud that had spattered into his eyes, he saw that he was at least fifteen feet from what seemed to be the firmer ground on either side of the mire in which he was engulfed.

He tried to lift his right leg, but it was held in a grip that defied all his efforts to break. His very effort served only to drive the left leg still deeper.

Had the headhunters not been in the jungle, he would have shouted for help on the chance that some friendly native, wandering in the wilderness, might hear and answer his call. But he knew that his enemies were probably nearer to him than any one else; and far better death in the quagmire than at the hands of those demons in human form.

It was a fearful plight, and Bomba realized it to the full. Unless help came promptly, it would be a matter of only a few minutes before the mud would suck him down and close over his head.

He thought of his friends in such sore peril from the threatened attack by the savages. He could not warn them now.

To his straining ears came the sounds of a crackling in the brush some little distance away. He looked eagerly in that direction. Did that sound convey any message of hope to him?

A moment later that hope died. It was not the tread of human feet that he heard, but the soft padding of an animal's paws.

A moment later a great head was thrust through the opening in a thicket and Bomba looked into the greenish-yellow eyes of a monster puma, the lord of all four-footed things in the Amazonian jungle!

The eyes of boy and brute met and held. In those of the puma appeared at first surprise, then suspicion, then gloating. It sensed at once the helpless position of the jungle boy.

Yet was Bomba altogether helpless? That rifle in his hand! Through all his vicissitudes Bomba had managed to keep that precious weapon! The rifle might have death in it.

Crouching close to the ground, never removing its rapacious gaze from its hoped-for prey, the

puma advanced inch by inch, its tail switching, a low rumble issuing from its throat.

Instinctively Bomba felt for a cartridge in his belt. But all the missiles were covered with mud and the gun itself was coated from the splashing in the slime. Bomba tried desperately to clean and load, and in the effort felt himself sinking lower.

Now from the opposite side of the marsh stalked another puma, probably the mate of the first. It, too, was going to be in at the kill!

Even as he tried to load the rifle, Bomba felt the danger there might be in firing. The report would surely reach the ears of the headhunters and they would come rushing pellmell to the spot; and as between beasts and men Bomba preferred to die beneath the claws and teeth of the former.

The two beasts came nearer and nearer until they reached the edge of the marsh, each on its own side. But as their paws began to sink they drew back. They had learned from their forebears how deadly was the quagmire.

Each was now near enough for a spring. Bomba could see every muscle in the huge beasts tighten. It would have been easy to launch themselves upon the head and shoulders of their victim. But there would be the problem of getting back with their prey to the solid ground. The thought gave pause to the cunning brutes.

They circled about the quagmire, testing it at various points with their paws, trying to find some more solid part of it that would bear their weight. But each time their paws sank in and they drew hastily back.

But the blood lust was strong within them, and sooner or later Bomba knew that it would be too strong for caution. They would take a chance of making their kill and in some way floundering back to solid ground.

Bomba was now down over his waist. He was as near to despair as his indomitable will ever permitted him to be. He noted now that the puma that had first appeared on the scene was screwing his courage up to the point of daring the quagmire and making his spring.

Four spears came hurtling through the air. Two of them struck each puma, and with such force had they been hurled that in each case the points passed through the bodies of the transfixed beasts and came out on the other side.

With terrific roars of rage and pain the brutes bounded into the air and then came down and rolled over, biting with their teeth and tearing with their claws at the death-dealing missiles. Only for a few moments, however, did this endure, and then the pumas stretched out and lay still.

Not daring to believe his eyes, Bomba saw

four flying figures emerge from the woods and hurry down to the edge of the quagmire.

"Gibo!" cried Bomba. "Lodo! Ashati! Neram! Oh, what good friends you are of Bomba!"

"Yes, Master," responded Gibo, his eyes glowing with delight. "The spears of Bomba's friends have found the hearts of the pumas."

The joy of the others was quite as apparent, and they set to work at once to rescue the jungle lad from his awful position.

They gathered logs and the planks from a shattered native cabin near by and threw them into the quagmire until they had made a broad and comparatively solid platform. On this they all hurried out until they could get their hands on Bomba's arms and that part of his body that was not yet submerged. Then, with straining muscles, they drew him up and onto the platform and along that made their way to shore.

Death had come so near the jungle lad that its dark wings had brushed him. But now he was safe and his eyes were full of gratitude as he turned them upon his dusky friends.

Friends they were in truth, bound to him by the strongest of ties—Gibo, whom Bomba had saved from the flood; Ashati and Neram, the ex-slaves whom he had freed from the cruel tyranny of Jojasta, the Medicine Man of the Moving

Mountain; Lodo, the chief lieutenant of Hondura and leader of the Araos braves with whom more than once Bomba had fought side by side. All of them had been under heavy obligation to Bomba at one time or another, and now they were delighted that they had been able in part at least to pay their debt.

"Bomba will never forget," said the lad feelingly. "He will remember Gibo and Lodo and Ashati and Neram until the cloud of death comes over his eyes."

"It is but a little thing," asserted Ashati. "Do we not owe our lives to Bomba?"

"How does it come," asked the lad, as with bunches of grass he cleaned the mud from his body and his weapons, "that you are in the jungle when the sun has scarcely risen and so far from the maloca of Hondura?"

"Your servants were scouting at the word of Hondura," replied Lodo, "and already their eyes have seen evil things. They were making haste to speak words with Hondura when they saw the pumas about to spring on Bomba."

"Bomba, too, has seen those evil things you speak of, the headhunters," replied the jungle boy. "He was hurrying to the maloca to warn Hondura when the quagmire trapped his feet."

"There are more in the jungle than the headhunters of Nascanora," said Lodo gravely.

"Moltotak-Aya, the chief of the Abaragos, has come with many of his braves to take vengeance on Bomba for taking the sacred flowers from the Swamp of Death."

This was ominous news, for the Abaragos were reputed to be even more cruel and ferocious, if that were possible, than the warriors of Nascanora.

"It is bad news that Lodo brings!" exclaimed the lad. "Let us make haste to get to the maloca. Draw your spears from the bodies of the pumas and then put wings to your feet."

They did as directed, and under the lead of Bomba struck out through the jungle in as straight a line as possible for the tribal home of the Araos.

They had traveled for perhaps an hour when Bomba halted abruptly, waved his hand to his followers in warning, and threw himself flat on the ground.

Instantly the Indians followed their leader's example.

Bomba's quick ears sooner than theirs had caught the faint, distant sound of marching feet.

CHAPTER VI

FULL OF MENACE

BOMBA and his companions, safely screened by bushes, strained their eyes in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

The tread of feet grew more distinct and then, through an opening in the jungle, came into view a horde of savages marching in single file.

Bomba knew at a glance that they were not the headhunters of Nascanora. On their breasts was daubed the symbol of the Abarago tribe—the Sacred Alligator!

This, then, confirmed the news that Lodo had brought. The dreaded warriors from the Swamp of Death had joined forces with the men from the Giant Cataract.

At the head of the line strode a gigantic savage, more than six and a half feet in height. His followers were unusually tall men, but he towered above them all.

His face was seamed with scars received in many a combat, and these added to the ferocity of his expression. In one hand he carried a

spear and in the other a heavy knotted war club.

"Moltotak-Aya!" breathed Bomba to himself. He had little doubt that the leader was the redoubtable chief whom hitherto he had known only by name, the man "whose tongue spoke thunder and whose eyes shot lightnings."

It was not a pleasant sight to study that array of hideously painted faces and reflect upon the mission that had brought them into this part of the jungle. Bomba counted them as they passed. More than fifty were in the company, and there was no knowing how many more might be scattered on various errands.

Combining these with Nascanora's men, there would be well over a hundred. And Bomba knew that Hondura's effective fighting men did not approach that number. Several groups of bucks, not knowing of the raid of the invaders, had gone off on long hunting expeditions and it might be days or even weeks before they returned.

Crouching close in his covert, Bomba heard a slight rustling. He turned his head in the direction of the sound and saw not more than four feet away in the very thicket that served him as refuge a jararaca, the deadly rattlesnake of the Brazilian jungle!

Had he been unobserved and had freedom of movement, it would have been an easy matter

to crush the snake with the butt of his gun or send an arrow into it.

But the line of savages had halted now for some purpose at the command of the chief, and that functionary himself was in an animated conversation with two who seemed to be his lieutenants. The slightest movement on Bomba's part would be noted by the savages, who from long habit were constantly sending roving glances over the jungle in their vicinity.

Stealthily Bomba's hand glided to his belt and drew out his long knife. If the worst came to the worst, if the reptile discovered his presence, he knew that it would coil and spring like lightning. If he wanted to preserve his life he would have to be quicker with the knife than the snake was with its fangs.

Seconds passed that seemed like minutes—minutes that seemed like hours. Bomba's nerves were under a terrific strain. Within arm's length was death. Not many yards away in that line of waiting savages was death still more terrible.

The perspiration started from his brow as he watched with terrible fascination those restlessly moving coils. When would the head be lifted? When would the rattles sound as the serpent should discover the intruder in its haunts?

A guttural command rang down the line and the savages recommenced their march. Bomba

watched them with his heart in his mouth. A few moments more and they would have vanished into the underbrush.

Then a prickly feeling ran down his spine as he saw an ugly triangular head slowly lift itself from the mass of coils.

The jararaca looked lazily around.

It caught sight of Bomba. Instantly it flared with anger. It sounded its warning and with incredible swiftness threw itself into a coil and reared its head to strike.

Bomba's arm sprang out like lightning and his knife sliced the reptile's head from its body.

The stroke was made just at the instant that the last of the Abaragos disappeared.

For this Bomba was thankful, as the fearful floundering that was set up by the headless body would have attracted attention in an instant.

He moved back in disgust from the red spray that splattered over his hands and face. He wiped the knife with grass, restored it to his belt and, kicking aside the severed head of the reptile, stole over to his companions.

"Come!" he adjured them. "We have lost much time and there is much distance to travel."

They sprang to their feet and followed his lead.

One element of satisfaction Bomba had drawn from the sight of the savages. They were not

going in the direction of the maloca of Hondura. Rather, they seemed to be bent on joining forces with the men of Nascanora.

Another hope came into his mind as he moved swiftly along. He would have been much more apprehensive if the warriors of Nascanora had constituted one force under the direction of a single chief. But he knew how difficult it was for two separate tribes to act together for a common purpose. The chiefs stood on their dignity and were childishly jealous of each other.

Still, the jungle boy did not rely on this, but pressed himself and his followers to the utmost, so that early in the afternoon they reached the outskirts of the Araos village.

Pirah was the first to descry them, and rushed out impetuously to grasp the hand of Bomba.

"The heart of Pirah is glad when Bomba comes!" the little girl exclaimed, as she skipped by his side.

"And Bomba's heart rejoices when his eyes fall on Pirah," returned the jungle lad. "He is glad to see Pirah laugh and to hear her sing. Bomba will talk with Pirah later. Now he wants to make much talk with Pirah's father, the good chief, Hondura."

A cloud came upon the child's brow.

"Pirah's father is sick," she said. "He is in

his bed and in the night he was tossing about and saying foolish things."

"Hondura sick!" exclaimed Bomba, startled. It was disconcerting news just at this time when such terrible danger threatened. The chief was old, too old to do much effective service as a warrior. But he was versed in all the features of savage warfare and Bomba held his shrewdness and sagacity in high esteem.

"Come," said the little maiden, tightening her grasp on Bomba's hand. "He will be glad to see Bomba, for he knows that Bomba is very brave and very wise. Perhaps," she added wistfully, for her faith in the lad was unbounded, "Bomba may be able to make my father well again."

Bomba hurried with her to the dwelling of Hondura and was at once admitted to the room in which the old warrior was lying. A medicine man, squatting before a kettle, was brewing some native potion and at the same time muttering incantations to the gods.

Bomba saw at a glance that the old man's eyes were bright with fever. But the delirium that Pirah had hinted at had left him, and he welcomed Bomba with a smile.

"Bomba is welcome," he said. "Hondura is always as glad to see Bomba as though he were his own son. What news does Bomba bring to his friend Hondura?"

It was anything but good news, and Bomba hesitated to tell it in the presence of Pirah.

"What Bomba has to tell is for the ears of Hondura alone," the lad said.

The ominous quality of the jungle boy's tone caused Hondura to look at him in some apprehension.

"Let Pirah go to the house of the women," said the chief, turning to the little girl.

Pirah's eyes clouded, but the habit of obedience was strong in her and she left the room.

"Now let Bomba speak what is in his mind," said the old chief anxiously.

"Bomba will not vex the ears of Hondura with many words," the lad stated. "The headhunters of Nascanora are in the jungle and with them are the braves of Moltotak-Aya, the chief of the Abaragos."

Even the stolidity on which the old warrior prided himself was not proof against the shock caused by Bomba's statement. He lifted himself to a sitting position and an expression of deep concern came into his seamed and withered face.

"Headhunters! Abaragos!" he exclaimed. "Is Bomba sure? Have his own eyes seen them?"

"Bomba has looked upon and counted them," replied the jungle boy, and went on to recount the happenings of that morning and the previous afternoon.

Hondura listened with bated breath.

"And Hondura is in his bed when he ought to be at the head of his warriors!" the old man groaned, as he swung his legs over the side of his couch and sought to stand on his feet.

But in his weakened condition his legs gave way under him, and he would have fallen had not Bomba sprung to his side and caught him.

"It is not well that Hondura should tax his strength when the gods have laid their hands on him," protested Bomba, as he laid the panting figure on the bed. "Let not Hondura's mind be grieved overmuch. The brave Lodo is here to lead Hondura's warriors, and Bomba will fight by his side. The wisdom of Hondura can give counsel and Lodo and Bomba will be Hondura's arms and feet."

"Bomba needs not counsel," was the tribute paid by the aged chief. "He has the cunning of the fox, the eyes of the hawk and the courage of the puma. He has already fought with Nascanora. He has dared the wrath of Moltotak-Aya. Who should lead Hondura's warriors but Bomba? He shall speak and the braves of Hondura will obey. Hondura has spoken."

This was a complete delegation of authority, the putting of the entire preparations for defense in Bomba's hands. The lad had not sought it, but he did not shrink from it.

"Hondura has spoken," the boy said gravely. "Bomba will obey. Let Hondura give Bomba the bracelet that is upon his wrist, so that when Bomba speaks the braves of the Araos will know that he speaks with the tongue of Hondura."

The old chief took the circlet that was his symbol of authority and himself slipped it over the boy's wrist.

"It is well," said the lad. "Now Bomba will go and get the braves ready to fight. Let not Hondura's heart be troubled, for Bomba hopes soon to bring Hondura better news than his tongue has spoken this day."

He left the presence of the chief to find the whole village buzzing with excitement. Lodo and his companions had spread the story of the coming of the invaders and fear reigned in all hearts. The children were huddled together, tearful and distraught. The women were already at work on the food and clothing for the warriors, while the men were sharpening their spearheads and whetting their knives for the coming conflict.

Bomba spoke soothing words to the women and gathered the men into council. He displayed the bracelet of Hondura and his authority was acknowledged without question.

Under his directions the Indians set instantly to work. The palisade that had formerly surrounded the town, but which had fallen into dis-

repair in the period of peace, was strengthened. On the outer side of it a trench was dug, studded with spear points, so that any falling into it would be maimed, and then covered lightly with brush and earth so that it would not be discovered until the rushing hordes were upon it. Scouts were sent in all directions to spy out the enemy and give warning of their approach. Women were set to work making arrows for the warriors and boiling caldrons of water to be poured on the heads of the besiegers when they attacked the palisades. Bomba was here, there, and everywhere, supervising, encouraging, directing, infusing into his dusky followers his own indomitable will and courage—a young Napoleon of the jungle.

While busily engaged at one end of the village he was startled by a cackle of hideous laughter close behind him.

He whirled about to look into the eyes of Sobrinini, the witch woman of the Island of Snakes.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE PROPHECY

THE same chill ran through Bomba's veins that he always felt when brought in contact with the witch woman. He had little superstition in his nature, but Sobrinini seemed to him almost like an inhabitant of another world.

Her disheveled hair and tattered garments floated about her like the snakes of which she had been so fond on her fearful island. Her cheeks were withered and cadaverous, her mouth toothless, and her eyes, in their sunken orbits, blazed with the light of insanity.

But most awful of all was that crackling voice, strident and shrill, that voice that in her prime had held Europe spellbound and had brought princes and kings to her feet.

She leered at Bomba in a mocking way as she again broke out in that screeching laugh.

"So Bomba is making ready to fight the men of Nascanora and the braves of the Abaragos!" she shrilled. "Bomba is wasting his time, for they will not come."

"They are in the jungle," said the lad gravely, "and they are hungry for heads."

"Still Sobrinini says that they will not come," persisted the witch woman.

"How does Sobrinini know?" asked Bomba.

"Sobrinini knows many things," responded the hag. "Her snakes whisper them to her. The snakes of Sobrinini are far away, but their voices carry to her across the jungle. If Bomba listens, he can hear them hiss."

She assumed an attitude of listening that was so weird and dreadful that the boy could feel the hair rising on his head.

"The snakes have said to Sobrinini that the headhunters will not come," the old woman went on. "Yet"—she paused as if perplexed—"the king of the snakes is whispering to Sobrinini now that the headhunters have changed their minds. They will come, but they will not take the heads of Bomba or Sobrinini or Casson or any of the Araos to put on the roofs of their wigwams."

Again a burst of insane laughter.

"The king of the snakes is whispering another thing to Sobrinini," she went on. "He says that Bomba will go far into the jungle and find his father."

The boy's heart leaped. This hodgepodge of crazy imaginings had had little effect when the old woman was speaking of his enemies. But his

father! Could it be possible that, dismissing all the nonsense about the snakes, the half-crazed woman was endowed with the gift of second sight?

"What means Sobrinini when she speaks of Bomba's father?" asked the lad eagerly.

A look of cunning came into the wildly glittering eyes.

"Only Sobrinini knows all that Sobrinini means," she chuckled. "Bomba has heard what Sobrinini said. Bomba will not find his father."

"Is Sobrinini mocking Bomba?" asked the boy, in bewilderment. "She says Bomba will find his father. Then she says that Bomba will not find his father. Which is true?"

"Both are true," cackled Sobrinini, as she whirled herself away in a sort of dervish dance, her hair and her rags fluttering in the wind. "Bomba is wise. Let Bomba read Sobrinini's riddle."

Chagrined and angry at himself for having let himself be impressed for a moment by the witch woman's ravings, Bomba turned again to his work and tried to dismiss her from his mind. But this was not easy. Her words about his father persisted. It brought again to him the great yearning to know of his parentage that was the master passion of his soul, and it made him restless and perturbed.

It was late that night before Bomba felt that

he had done all in the way of defense that could be done. One of his scouts had returned, saying that the headhunters and Abaragos were having a great powwow that was to be followed by rites and incantations that would probably endure long into the night. The attack, if it came, would probably not take place till the next day at the earliest.

Relieved at this, but still maintaining the utmost vigilance, Bomba posted guards at various points along the palisade and turned toward the dwelling that he occupied with Casson.

The thought of the old man had been with him ever since he had reached the village, but the urgency of preparing for defense had been so great that he had not had a moment to devote to him. Now his feet were swift as he hurried toward the old naturalist who had been to him the only father he had ever known.

He found the frail old man sitting in a chair and waiting for him. This in itself was encouraging, as for some time Casson had been almost entirely confined to his bed.

Bomba noted too that the waxen pallor of Casson's face was now subdued by a slight flush and that as the old man rose to meet him he seemed more alert and vigorous than he had been for years.

They greeted each other with an affectionate embrace.

"My dear boy!" exclaimed Casson, and the voice was unusually clear and distinct. "I heard that you had come and my heart rejoiced."

"I would have come to you sooner," replied the lad; "but I have been busy with making the village strong. The headhunters are in the jungle and they may come at any time."

"So I have heard," replied Casson, a crease of anxiety coming into his brow. "They are terrible, bloodthirsty men and greatly to be feared. Yet your wit and courage have beaten them once and I believe it will again."

"Bomba will do his best," promised the lad. "But let us speak of other things. Bomba is glad that you seem to be getting strong and well again."

"Yes," agreed Casson, "I have been steadily getting better since the white men came. The medicine from the red flowers has put strength into my arms and legs and has made the blood flow more strongly in my veins."

"And the mind," suggested Bomba. "Does Casson remember better than he did? Can he now tell Bomba more about his father and his mother?"

Casson's face fell.

"There is still a veil over that," he admitted sadly. "But I can feel that the veil is becoming

thinner. Thoughts and words and memories come almost to my lips, but then they seem to be checked. But my head does not pain so much when I try to remember, and I am sure that, as my body grows stronger, my memory will become clearer. We must be patient a little longer. In time it will come."

Bomba shared that belief, and though he would have dearly liked to pursue the subject, he saw that Casson was becoming a little excited. So he changed the subject and shortly afterward retired to rest.

But he had no idea of losing himself in slumber. The responsibility resting upon him was too great. He slept in periods of not more than an hour's duration and then rose to make a round of the guards. Nothing alarming had been detected and the night passed without the semblance of an attack.

Nor was there any the following day or the next. The scouts who came in from time to time reported that there seemed to be dissensions in the ranks of the two parties. Instead of mingling freely together, each side held aloof from the other, and there were mutterings and black looks that indicated serious disagreement between Nascanora and Moltotak-Aya.

All this was music to Bomba's ears, but he did not permit it to abate in any degree his vigilance.

Hour by hour the camp was strengthened in every way his ingenuity could devise until he felt that the maloca was almost impregnable. If the headhunters and Abaragos attacked each other, so much the better. If they did not, Bomba felt that he was ready for them.

Hondura had not yet reached the crisis of his fever and his enfeebled condition made him nervous and apprehensive. He could not face things with the stolidity and hardihood that were habitual to him when in health. Fear preyed upon him especially over what might happen to Pirah in case the enemy was victorious.

That little maiden was the apple of his eye, the darling of his old age. Most of his other ambitions had faded with the passing of the years, and now his whole life was bound up in the welfare of his little daughter.

On the second day after Bomba's arrival he was summoned to the hut of Hondura.

"Hondura would speak with Bomba," said the chief when the jungle boy entered.

"Bomba listens when Hondura speaks," the lad responded, as he seated himself beside the couch.

"The little Pirah is always in Hondura's mind," went on the chieftain. "He fears for her at the hands of the headhunters. Hondura does not care for himself. He is old and must soon go to the

place of the dead. But his heart is sore for Pirah."

"Bomba will die before he will let Pirah get hurt," promised the lad.

"Hondura knows that Bomba speaks from the heart," said the chief. "He would die for Pirah, as he says. But after Bomba dies Pirah would still be left at the mercy of the evil men. And when Hondura thinks of that his blood freezes in his veins. So Hondura is going to send Pirah to the tribe of the Matanas, where is the aunt of Pirah. It is well that the Matanas, who have always been friendly to the people of Hondura, should be warned that the headhunters are in the jungle. But the Matanas are far away, and it may be that the evil men will not go so far as that. So Hondura feels that Pirah would be safer there than here, and her aunt Amina will be as a mother to Pirah."

He paused and waited for Bomba's answer. The boy thought deeply. He felt that in the main Hondura was right. The Matanas were located several days' march away, and it was wholly unlikely that the headhunters would carry their depredations so far. It had always been their custom to make sudden raids, secure their quota of heads and loot and then retreat to their far-away village before the other tribes would have time to combine and perhaps wipe them out.

They would probably follow the same plan on the present occasion.

To be sure, there were obstacles in the way. The party of which little Pirah would be a member might be surprised by their enemies in the jungle. This was unlikely, however, because their path would lead in an entirely different direction from the region that the enemy was infesting. Hondura was right in saying that Pirah ran more risks in staying than in going.

"Hondura speaks well," the boy stated at last. "There is danger in either case, but there is less chance of Pirah being hurt or captured if she goes to the tribe of the Matanas. But who shall go with her to see that she suffers no harm on the way?"

"It is in the mind of Hondura that Lodo shall go with Gibo, Ashati, and Neram," said the chief. "They are good men and brave and they know the jungle as the jaguar knows it. A number of the younger warriors and two of Pirah's women shall go with them. Hondura would ask that Bomba go, for there is none like Bomba in all the jungle. But if Bomba went, the people of the Araos would be like a body without a head."

"It is well," agreed Bomba. "It shall be done as Hondura says. They shall start before the sun reaches the top of the sky."

He went out to give his orders, which were

obeyed without question by all except the little girl herself. She was quite determined that nothing should take her away from Bomba. But the lad cajoled and soothed her by representing the thing as something in the way of a gay excursion and promised that when all danger was over he himself would come to the tribe of the Matanas and bring her back to her father.

Bomba hated to spare four of his best and most devoted men, but their temporary loss was made up by the return of a hunting party of a dozen braves, so that his force was not really depleted.

Two more days passed, and still there was no attack. Bomba was perplexed by this inaction on the part of his foes. If the assault were coming at all, he preferred that it should be soon while his men were screwed up to fighting pitch. Suspense was worse to his own active spirit than actual battle.

Part of this strange delay was explained when his scouts brought him the good news that Molto-tak-Aya and his Abaragos had started on the homeward march. It seemed that the omens had been against their attacking the Araos. Their medicine man had told them that the gods did not look with favor on the project and that dire disaster would fall upon them if they persisted.

Bomba made a shrewd guess that the real

cause was an unwillingness on the part of Molto-tak-Aya to coöperate with Nascanora, and that the medicine man had been given a hint by his chief about interpreting the omens so that the savage warrior might "save his face." But he was too delighted at the fact to care much about the cause. Now he would have to deal only with the headhunters. Though they alone were formidable enough, he well knew.

On the third night Bomba apprehended that something was brewing. There had been no specially disquieting reports brought by his scouts. To all appearances Nascanora was still dallying. But the very quiet of his enemies for so long a time while still remaining in the vicinity told the jungle boy that he must be especially on the alert that night.

He told his men the impression he had and enjoined upon them special vigilance. He saw that every one was at his post lying flat on the ground behind the palisade. The early part of the night was pitch dark with not a trace of moon or stars.

But the moon would rise soon and Bomba knew that the attack would come, if it came at all, before that time so as to take advantage of the darkness.

But it was no part of Bomba's strategy to have the village seem dark and dead. That would make the enemy suspicious. They would scent a

trap. So Bomba ordered that lights should appear as usual in all the huts. He went further and directed the women to gather in one of the central groups of huts and indulge in singing and dancing so that it would seem as though a festival of some sort was in progress and that the people were care-free and wholly unaware that danger was threatening.

Bomba could imagine how Nascanora, creeping up with his men, would smack his lips gloatingly over so easy a conquest as the festive village would seem to be.

So the women danced and sang while the men, stark and silent, waited for the enemy.

An hour passed; two. Then from the black jungle came the tiniest rustling like a faint sighing through the trees, scarcely audible above the hum of the insects of the night.

Bomba heard it, and his eyes glowed, his nerves stiffened, his muscles grew hard and tense.

He knew what that sound meant. The head-hunters were coming!

CHAPTER VIII

DRIVEN BACK

THAT ominous rustling sound grew louder and louder and soon the eyes of Bomba, searching the darkness, could discern masses that stood out as deeper blurs of blackness against the night.

The jungle boy had taken up his own position with his rifle at the very center of his men where he could supervise every movement on the right and the left. He had emphasized the fact that under no conditions was any one to loose an arrow or hurl a spear until he should give the word.

On crept the savages, foot by foot, until they were within about thirty feet of the palisade. Then the body halted as the tiger crouches before he makes his spring.

There was a breathless pause. Then from savage throats arose a wild, demoniac yell that woke the echoes of the jungle. Simultaneously the attackers rushed forward to scale or push their way through the palisade.

"Now!" shouted Bomba, as his rifle spoke.

A deadly shower of arrows whizzed through

the crevices of the palisade that served as loopholes. They mowed down the forward line like grass.

And above the song of the arrows came the report of Bomba's rifle again and again.

Yells of fright and surprise rose from the ranks of the headhunters as they realized that the strategy of the defenders had drawn them into a trap. Some of them had fallen into the concealed trench and the spikes had pierced their feet. Others struggled on past this obstacle and sought to scale the palisade. But on these the spears got in their deadly work.

Before this fierce defense, the invaders fell back in wild panic and confusion. Bomba could hear the harsh voice of Nascanora as he strove to rally his men, but they were beyond his control for the moment. Shrieking and groaning, they fled in utter rout into the jungle.

A shout of jubilation rose from the Araos braves, and many of the more impetuous spirits sought to scale the palisade and pursue their enemies into the black forest. But Bomba sternly ordered them back. He knew where his advantage lay and he was determined to maintain it. Up to now he had not lost a man, though two had been wounded by the arrows that the headhunters had let fly when they made their charge.

Should he permit them to pursue, a few more

of the headhunters might be slain, but some of his own men also would probably lose their lives. Bomba did not want that there should be any wailing of bereaved wives and orphaned children in the huts of the Araos. Nor, for that matter, did he want to kill any more of his enemies than he was compelled to. The boy loathed bloodshed for its own sake. He would only kill when it was necessary to save his own life or those of his friends. If he could drive back the headhunters so that they would retreat to their own distant village, he was content.

So he restrained his warriors, reformed their lines, and waited for a second attack. Outside the palisade he could see a number of the enemy lying silent on the ground. Others, wounded and groaning, were seeking to crawl away to rejoin their companions in the jungle.

Bomba struck down the bow of one of his men who was taking aim at one such unfortunate.

"It is not well to kill a wounded man," he stated. "He can no longer do us hurt. Of what use to send him to the place of the dead? Perhaps a wife and children are waiting for him at the Giant Cataract."

The warrior looked at the white boy in wonder. This was strange doctrine to his mind. His theory had always been to slay a wounded enemy.

But Bomba's ascendancy was so great that he lowered his bow and obeyed without demur.

Hours passed and the second attack did not come. Bomba waited till midnight, and then sent out several scouts to find out what the enemy was doing. They returned soon to report that the headhunters were fleeing in a disorganized mob through the jungle. Nascanora had given up his fruitless attempt to rally them and was being swept along with the throng. The heavy losses they had suffered had sent terror into their hearts.

The danger seemed to be over. The lesson was so severe that it would probably be a long time before the warriors of Nascanora would again invade that section of the jungle.

At Bomba's command, his people gathered up the dead enemies outside the palisade and buried them. The wounded had been carried away by their comrades. More than a dozen had been killed. How many had been wounded, those in the village of the Araos could not tell. Probably a large number. It was a great victory, and all the more a subject of rejoicing because none of the Araos had been killed and only two slightly wounded.

The affection and trust the Indians had placed in Bomba was now scarcely less than adoration. They clustered about him expressing their pride and delight in his leadership. And the dancing

and singing of the women that had up to that time been a mere pretense were changed into a performance of genuine and unrestrained exultation.

But Bomba did not abate one jot of his wariness. Guards were posted, with injunctions to maintain strict vigilance throughout the night. Then Bomba, with the feeling of having had a ton lifted from his heart and mind, sought out the dwelling of Hondura.

The relief and satisfaction of the aged chief at the news of the victory were beyond all words. He embraced the jungle lad with emotion and gave him unstinted praise for his successful leadership. Bomba waved away the praise, but he was grateful just the same.

"Bomba has given new life to Hondura," declared the chieftain. "It is better than the brews of the medicine man. Now will Hondura shake off the evil sickness and be again with his warriors instead of lying in bed."

Indeed, the news proved a tonic, for from that hour the chief began to mend and within a week was again going about almost as usual.

During that week Bomba kept his scouts busy, directing them to hold to the rear of the retreating forces until convinced that the retreat was no mere feint to throw the Araos off their guard, but was genuine. By the time the week was up there was no doubt about it. The headhunters

were hurrying as fast as their legs would carry them toward the Giant Cataract. And Bomba, from his acquaintance with the habits of the Indians, knew that it would be a year at least, perhaps many years, before those demons would again invade that region in order to loot and kill.

When the retreat had become a certainty, Bomba began to grow restless. To one of his active habits it had been intolerable to be cooped up so long in the limits of a village. He felt as an eagle feels in a cage when every instinct urges it to spread its pinions and soar into the skies.

Besides, the village was growing short of meat. With the usual improvidence of the jungle dwellers, the Araos lived from hand to mouth, rarely storing up supplies in advance but depending on what the bucks brought in from day to day. Now, because of the presence of the headhunters, hunting for game had had to be abandoned and the people of the village were subsisting upon scanty rations.

There was nothing to detain him in the maloca. Hondura was now almost himself again and things were moving along in the customary groove. Casson was improving steadily under the watchful care of Pipina, the squaw. Bomba pined for action.

So after announcing his decision to hunt for meat and taking a warm farewell of Hondura,

Casson and the rest of the people of the maloca, who showered him with good wishes, Bomba plunged into the jungle.

With what delight he found himself once more foot-loose and master of his own movements! He was in his element. He was Bomba, the jungle boy. He could have danced and shouted.

There were not wanting ghastly evidences of the recent presence of the headhunters. Twice Bomba came upon a skeleton, in each case stripped clean of flesh by the vultures, relics of the wounded who had succumbed to their injuries.

He had turned his steps in the direction of the tribe of the Matanas. There was a secret uneasiness that he refused to acknowledge to himself because of the delay in returning of the warriors who had taken little Pirah to the dwelling of her aunt. To be sure, it was several days' march away. Then, too, the Matanas had doubtless, according to native custom, celebrated the coming of their friends with festivities that might be extended to several days and that it would not be etiquette to refuse. But after making all these deductions, Lodo and his companions ought to be back by now, if they had met with no mischance on their journey to the Matanas and back. Could anything possibly have happened to little Pirah? The thought was intolerable and he resolved to find out. Besides, he had promised Pirah that

when all danger from the headhunters should be past he would seek her out and bring her back to her father.

So, spurred by his restlessness on the little girl's account, he made rapid time through the jungle. He would not stop now for game, but would attend to that on the way back.

It was the middle of the afternoon when there was a fluttering in the branches above him and two gayly plumaged parrots swooped down and settled one on each shoulder with a confidence and familiarity that spoke of long acquaintance.

"Kiki and Woowoo!" cried Bomba in delight, as he stroked their feathers. "So their sharp eyes have seen Bomba between the leaves and they have come to talk with him! It is well. Bomba is very glad to see Kiki and Woowoo again."

If they did not understand the exact words, they knew perfectly well what he meant by the cordiality of his tone, and they chattered back to him in return, taking affectionate nips at his ears and nestling closer to his throat.

For a long time they kept company with him until, fearing to carry them too far from their accustomed haunts, the lad pointed upward and gave them their dismissal.

Another of his friends made his appearance a little later on when a monkey dropped from a

tree and placed a hairy arm around Bomba's neck.

"It is Doto come to see his friend Bomba!" exclaimed the lad with genuine pleasure, as he ran his hand through the shaggy hair. "It is a long time that Bomba has been shut up in the village of Hondura, but he has thought often of Doto and longed to have talk with him."

The monkey jabbered something in reply that would have been unintelligible to any one but Bomba. The friendship between the oddly assorted pair had endured for years. On more than one occasion the monkey had given the lad warning of danger, and Bomba would never forget the night when, besieged in his cabin by the head-hunters, Doto had brought a small army of his comrades in answer to Bomba's call and had rained huge castana nuts from trees, nuts heavy enough to break a man's skull, upon the savages until they were thrown into panic and fled.

Bomba's face became grave as he listened to the excited chattering of the monkey.

"So Doto says there is danger and that Bomba is needed there," he said, feeling sure that his interpretation was correct. "Where is the danger that calls for Bomba?"

Doto extended an arm in the direction of the village of the Matanas and broke again into voluble jabbering.

Bomba pondered. It was quite within the pos-

sibilities that Doto in his extended wanderings had seen from the treetops some skirmish of Pirah's party with enemies of the jungle, either animal or human. He must hasten.

"It is good of Doto to tell this to Bomba," the lad said. "Bomba would like to stay and talk with Doto, but now he must put wings to his feet. Bomba will look for Doto when he comes this way again."

The monkey was reluctant to part with his friend, and though he obeyed Bomba's motion toward the trees, he kept swinging along from tree to tree above him until the lad's rapid pace out-distanced him.

Bomba redoubled his speed, his heart tortured with anxiety. He never for one moment doubted that he had understood the monkey correctly.

He had not progressed more than an hour after leaving his animal friend when he distinctly heard the sound of footsteps.

Instantly he blotted himself into the shadow of a thicket.

CHAPTER IX

STARTLING NEWS

IN the jungle every one must be deemed an enemy until he is proved to be a friend. Bomba knew the code and acted upon it.

With his rifle held ready for action, he peered through the screen of brush in the direction from which the sounds were coming.

He had not long to wait.

Along a faint trail that wound through the jungle appeared the form of a man, an Indian, from his dusky skin. He was staggering as though in the last stages of exhaustion. One foot seemed to be hurt and was dragged behind him with difficulty.

A moment after he had come in sight he seemed to give up the struggle. He raised his hands in a gesture of despair and then fell heavily forward on his face.

Bomba's impulse was to run forward to aid the stricken man. But, skilled in all the wiles of the jungle, he hesitated. His presence in the jungle might have become known and this apparent

collapse might be only a bait to draw him into the open and expose him to the spears and arrows of the man's companions.

But a minute's careful study of the man lying prone convinced Bomba that the stranger's plight was genuine. So, still keeping eyes and ears on the alert, he hurried over to the pitiful figure.

There was something familiar in the bronzed and brawny back that met his gaze. With an unanswered question in his mind he turned the figure over.

He started back with a gasp as he recognized Lodo!

But what a different Lodo from the one who had started out as the leader of Pirah's escorting party! The features were haggard and drawn, the body lank and emaciated. The breast was marked with scars of knife and spear. The legs were torn by thorns. One ankle was terribly swollen and inflamed.

With his mind in a tumult of emotions, Bomba placed the man in a comfortable position and ran to a spring not far distant to get water. With this he bathed the face and wrists and by chafing sought to bring the Araos back to consciousness.

Lodo's eyes opened at last and looked vaguely at the face of Bomba. But there was no conscious recognition in the gaze and the eyes closed

again. Gradually the lips began to mutter incoherent words and phrases.

Confident that the man was on his way to recovery, Bomba bestowed special attention on the injured ankle. He feared at first to find that a bone was broken, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he found that the ankle was only suffering from a bad sprain.

While he was thus ministering to the leader of Hondura's bucks, Bomba was suffering the keenest mental anguish. What had happened to little Pirah and the rest of her party? He conjectured the worst. He knew that Lodo had been engaged in a terrific fight. The partly healed scars showed that. Doto had not been wrong, then, when he had attempted to warn Bomba of disaster.

After what seemed an age, Lodo's eyes again opened. This time a gleam of intelligence came into them as they looked into those of the jungle boy.

"It is Bomba," he murmured weakly. "Is Lodo living or is he in the land of the ghosts?"

"Lodo lives, and it is Bomba, his friend, that he sees," replied the lad. "Speak, Lodo! Where is Pirah?"

A spasm of pain convulsed the native's face.

"She is gone, and Lodo is ashamed," he answered. "Pirah was given into his care and he

lost her. How can Lodo face Hondura and say those words to him?"

"Is she dead?" asked Bomba, in agony.

"She is not dead," was the reply. "But she is in the hands of enemies."

Bomba breathed more freely. The news was bad enough, but while there was life there was hope. He had rescued the little girl once before, from the hands of Nascanora. Fate might be kind again to him in the present instance.

"Who are these enemies?" he asked. "Are they the headhunters of the Giant Cataract or the warriors of the Abaragos? Speak quickly."

"They are warriors from the Valley of Skulls," replied Lodo, with an uncontrollable shudder in his voice.

Bomba felt the same shudder. He had heard terrible things about the Valley of Skulls and the fierce people who inhabited it. The place was dreaded far and wide among the Indians. Uncanny tales were told about it, one of them being that any prisoners taken into it never again came out. Ghosts and demons were said to guard it from the incursions of enemies. Men spoke the name of the place in whispers. Women quieted their fretful children by threatening that they should be taken to the Valley of Skulls.

"Let Lodo tell Bomba all that has happened," the lad directed.

"It was the second day after Lodo had left the maloca of Hondura," said the Indian. "We were in a rocky place when men rose up on every side and shot arrows at us and then rushed toward us with their spears. They were many times more than those who were with Lodo, but our people fought hard. We killed many of them, but they killed all who were with us except Pirah, Gibo, Ashati, Neram and Lodo. Lodo himself killed four, though he himself got many wounds"—he pointed to his breast—"and then a veil came over Lodo's eyes and he fell over a cliff near which he had been fighting."

"Brave Lodo!" said Bomba sympathetically. "Bomba knows that he would have died to save Pirah."

The Indian looked his gratitude.

"The men from the Valley of Skulls must have thought that Lodo had been killed by the fall, for they did not search for him," went on the Araos. "When Lodo opened his eyes again, it was morning of the next day. He had hurt his foot and he could hardly bear his weight upon it. But he had fallen into bushes that kept him from being killed.

"It took Lodo a long time to find the place where the fighting had been. There he found the bodies of the Araos who had been killed, but he did not find the bodies of Pirah, Gibo, Ashati and Neram. It is in Lodo's mind that they were taken

prisoners and carried off to the Valley of Skulls. Lodo followed the trail and could see the footprints of the little Pirah so he knows that she was still alive. And she must have been unhurt, for she was able to walk.

"But Lodo knew that he could not overtake the party, for they were going fast and with his hurt foot he could go but slowly. So he turned to go to the maloca of Hondura so that he could get warriors and follow the trail of the men from the Valley of Skulls. He has been many days on the trail, for many times darkness has come over his eyes and he has fallen."

Bomba pressed the man's hand sympathetically. He could envisage the agony of mind and body with which Lodo had pursued his weary journey.

"Lodo has done well," he stated. "None could have done more. He need not be ashamed to look Hondura in the face. Bomba will think, and we will find a way to get Pirah from the hands of her enemies. But now the night is coming on. Bomba will build a fire to keep the wild beasts away and he will give Lodo food and help to heal his injured foot. And by morning Bomba will have made a plan."

The jungle boy found a suitable place for a camp a little distance from the spot where Lodo had fallen. There he bestowed the Indian as comfortably as possible and gathered fuel for a

fire. Then he hunted up a batch of turtle eggs and with the cured meat that he had in his pouch prepared a satisfying meal, of which Lodo ate ravenously.

Following the meal, Bomba secured some of the mud that had such remarkable soothing and healing qualities and applied a poultice to the swollen ankle of the warrior. He kept renewing this from time to time throughout the night.

Lodo slept heavily, but all through that night Bomba did not once close his eyes. He was too restless, too mentally alert to dream of sleep. Little Pirah was in danger, danger of the most terrible kind. It was some relief to know that she was still alive. But for how long? She might be spared for the moment only to be delivered to torture when the enemy should find itself secure in its tribal haunts. Bomba knew only too well that her youth and helplessness were not likely to help her with her cruel captors. For cruel they were beyond all conception, if the bloodcurdling stories he had heard about them were true.

So he sat, as rigid as a statue, all through that night, only bestirring himself at intervals to feed the fire and continue his treatment of Lodo's foot.

At dawn Lodo awoke, immensely strengthened and refreshed. The food had revived him and his ankle was immeasurably better. He tested it and joy came over his swarthy features as he found

that he could bear his weight upon it with comparatively little pain.

"Lodo is a man again!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Now he can go with Bomba to find the little Pirah and bring her back to the maloca of Hondura."

"Not so," replied the jungle boy. "Bomba's journey requires haste and he must make his way as swiftly as the puma. Lodo could not keep up with Bomba. But Bomba has been thinking through the night and this must Lodo do. He must go as fast as he can to the maloca of Hondura and get the bucks of the Araos together and follow on Bomba's trail."

"But whither does Bomba go?" asked Lodo.

"Bomba goes," replied the lad, "to the place where the fighting was between Lodo and the men from the Valley of Skulls. Lodo will tell Bomba how he may get there most quickly. Then Bomba will take up the trail and follow after the evil men so that he may reach them before harm can come to little Pirah."

A startled look came into Lodo's face.

"Bomba is brave!" he exclaimed. "There is none so brave as Bomba in all the jungle. And he has the cunning of the snake and the quickness of the jaguar when he springs. But Bomba is only one and the evil men are as many as the

leaves of the jungle. Is it well that Bomba should go alone?"

"Bomba is used to going alone," the lad returned simply. "Was it not alone that he started out for the Moving Mountain and for the Giant Cataract and for the Island of Snakes and for the dwelling of Japazy, that man of evil? Yet Bomba still lives. Bomba will go alone after the men from the Valley of Skulls. He dares not wait till the men of Hondura are gathered together. But they can come after him."

"But how will they find the trail of Bomba?" asked Lodo dubiously. "It will be days before they can get to the place of the fighting and the rains may have blotted out the trail of Bomba."

"Bomba has thought of that," was the reply. "Bomba will leave a trail behind him that it will be easy for the warriors of the Araos to follow. He will cut the bark of many trees with his knife as he goes along, and from these slashes of the knife it will be known what way Bomba has gone. And Bomba will not rest until he has reached the Valley of Skulls."

The Valley of Skulls! Again a shudder ran through Lodo's frame.

CHAPTER X

ON THE TRAIL

"LET not a name affright you," adjured Bomba, as he noted the Indian's involuntary shudder. "In a name there is naught. Was not the Swamp of Death an evil name? Yet Bomba and Lodo came back from it alive. We will yet rescue little Pirah from the Valley of Skulls. But now let us spend no more time in making words, for Lodo must be on his way to the people of Hondura, while Bomba hastens to the place of fighting."

He hurriedly prepared their morning meal. Then he gave most of the provisions in his pouch to Lodo.

"Bomba can find game on the way," he said, when the native protested at his leaving himself such a meager supply; "but Lodo must have nothing to think of but how most quickly he can get to Hondura. Let Lodo now be on his journey, but let him go carefully lest his foot swell again and make him helpless."

They parted with a long look into each other's eyes that told of the strong affection that united

them. Bomba gazed after Lodo until his form vanished into the jungle. Then he stamped out the embers of the fire and turned his face toward the place of the combat between the party of Araos and their enemies.

Despite his cheering words to Lodo, he knew well that he was embarking on what might prove to be the most dangerous adventure of his life. He was one against a host of cruel and blood-thirsty enemies.

He tried to remember as he hurried along the things he had heard about the Valley of Skulls. They were vague at first, but gradually they took definite form in his mind.

Gruesome stories about the dreaded place were rife among the natives. It was said that it was inhabited by hideous monsters such as human eyes had never looked upon in any other section of the jungle.

There were dragons a hundred feet long with hideous claws and teeth and mouths from which spouted fire. There were monsters with animal bodies and frightful human heads that overtopped the trees. There were deadly plants and flowers whose odors were the breath of death. Even the waters were said to be poisonous. It was said that the natives of the place had charms that protected them from the poison, and that they preserved the favor of the monsters that inhabited

the place by offering to them human sacrifices in the persons of their captives.

Bomba knew how superstitious the jungle Indians were and what wild rein they gave to their fancies. His common sense told him that most of these things were exaggerations. Still, where there was so much smoke there must, he thought, be some fire. It was reasonably certain that the Valley of Skulls was a place of horror, and a stab went through his heart as he thought of little, helpless Pirah in such a terrible environment.

Straight as an arrow to its mark, he made his way through the jungle in the direction that Lodo had pointed out, and late in the afternoon reached the scene of conflict.

Abundant marks of that stark fight were still in evidence. The turf was beaten down by the feet that had surged back and forth over it and was still plentifully bedewed with red stains. In one spot he noted something bright. He stooped and picked it up and recognized it as part of a silver bracelet that had been worn by Pirah. He handled it tenderly and put it in his pouch and was surprised to find that his eyes were moist.

There, too, were the bodies of the Araos that had fallen in the conflict. They were no longer recognizable, for they were no more than skeletons, already stripped clean by the pirates of the air. But Bomba had been assured by Lodo that

they did not include the bodies of Gibo, Neram and Ashati.

The thought that these faithful friends of his had been captured with Pirah gave Bomba a gleam of comfort. He knew how devoted they were to the little girl, and they might yet be able to be of help to her in some time of stress.

There had been no recent rain, for which Bomba was thankful. The trail was still clear and easy to follow. There had been so many in the party that concealment of their tracks would have been out of the question. Besides, believing that all but their captives had been killed, the Araos, they thought, would never learn of the fate that had befallen the daughter of the chieftain of the tribe and would put it down as one of the unsolved tragedies of the jungle.

But they had had a long start. The fight had occurred several days before. Perhaps by this time they had already reached the Valley of Skulls and were safely ensconced in their ill-famed haunts.

Bomba tightened his belt and with a farewell glance at the grisly mementos of the fight started on his long pursuit.

The shadows were lengthening now, and he put forth all his energy in covering as many miles as possible before the night should come down upon him. He had traveled for perhaps an hour when

he was seized with an uneasy consciousness that he was being followed. Whether it was an animal or a man that was stalking him he did not know.

Was it possible that the assailants of Lodo and his party had left a rear guard in the case of possible pursuit?

He turned in all directions and drew long breaths of air into his dilated nostrils. Then he knew. It was not the man scent but that of beasts of the jungle.

Keeping a sharp lookout on each side and with many backward glances, he hurried along, all his senses alert, his weapons ready and his nerves strained to the highest pitch.

He soon became conscious of a faint padding of feet, a rustling in the bushes. Yet he could see nothing.

One thing puzzled him. He was sure that that stealthy movement had come from behind him. Yet, as he listened intently, the location of the sound seemed to have shifted. It came to him from the left of the trail that he was pursuing. A moment later he heard a similar sound at the right.

The truth burst upon him. He was being stalked, not by one animal but by several!

One was creeping up on him in the rear.

Others were keeping pace with him, one at least on either side.

Jaguars or pumas—he did not know which. Either of them would be formidable enough, if only one beast had to be encountered. But three! For all he knew more than three!

Bomba knew what the cunning brutes were planning. They would keep coming nearer, inch by inch, foot by foot. Then at a given moment one of them would make a rush. That would be the signal, and the others would be on him in a flash.

His resolve was taken on the instant. On the ground he would have no chance against three. He could perhaps kill one of them, but before he could turn on the others they would be upon him, clawing at his throat.

He glanced at the trees nearest him. Some had low-hanging branches. These he discarded. Those branches would be too easily reached.

But on one stately tree he noted that the lowest branch was at least thirty feet from the ground. There had been lower ones, but they had been broken off by storms.

He knew that the jaguars, if the stalking beasts were such, would climb after him. But he would be above them and would have a chance of picking them off as they ascended.

To think, with Bomba, was to act.

He stopped short beneath the tree. The rustling behind him and on either side stopped at the same instant. The eyes of his stalkers had seen him, though he could not see them.

Bomba grasped the trunk of the tree and shinned up it with an agility that Doto himself might have envied.

There was a moment's silence on the part of the unseen enemies. The unexpectedness of this act had evidently disconcerted them. One moment the boy had been there. The next he was thirty feet above the ground.

Only for a moment, however, did the paralysis persist. There was a vicious growl, and a huge jaguar bounded out of the brush from the rear.

There was a crashing in the bushes on each side of the trail, and two other jaguars joined the first.

There was gloating in the yellowish-green eyes as they surveyed the youth in the branches.

Trapped! Cornered! Treed! He was theirs!

CHAPTER XI

THE PUMA SPRINGS

WITH a roar of anticipated triumph, the nearest jaguar sprang at the tree and commenced to climb.

Bomba flung his rifle to his shoulder, took aim with a hand that did not tremble at a spot right between those glittering eyes, and fired.

A flash of flame, a report that echoed through the jungle, and the jaguar fell in a crumpled heap at the foot of the tree.

The bullet had penetrated the brain and the brute was dead before it struck the ground.

Bomba's heart beat triumphantly as he drew back the rifle to get ready for the others. But in the movement the stock was caught by the stump of a branch, jerked violently from the boy's grasp, and fell clattering to the earth beneath.

Not wholly evil was this, however, for the heavy butt of the rifle caught a second jaguar that had begun to climb full on the nose, sweeping it from its clutch on the tree.

It picked itself up, growling viciously and rub-

bing its head. Then with its eyes gleaming with fury, it dug its claws once more into the tree and began to make its way upward.

At the same instant, the remaining brute sprang for the other side of the tree trunk.

The loss of his rifle filled Bomba with consternation. He still had his bow and arrows, but the branches and foliage surrounding him made it impossible to have free arm space enough to use them to any effect.

He drew his knife and leaned down as far as he could toward his climbing enemies, hoping to get in a stroke before they reached him.

It was a forlorn hope, for if, by rare good fortune, he could kill or disable one, the other would be upon him before he could again wield the knife.

Just then there came a terrific roar, and a great tawny body launched itself through the air upon the hindquarters of the nearer jaguar.

The impact was tremendous, and both beasts fell to the ground. In a moment they were rolling over and over in a life and death grapple, each trying to get at the other's throat.

The remaining jaguar, halfway up the tree on the opposite side, stopped short, utterly confused by the sudden attack upon its comrade. For a moment it seemed undecided, but the hesitation was only brief.

The boy in the tree was captive and could be

attended to later. The thing to do now was to conquer the newcomer that had dared to come between the jaguars and their prey.

It slid down the tree as fast as it could and immediately pounced upon its enemy, whom Bomba had already recognized as a puma.

"Polulu!" he cried. "Brave Polulu! The good friend of Bomba has come to his help!"

But the puma was fighting at a terrible disadvantage. Each of the jaguars was nearly or quite as large and powerful as itself. That Polulu could conquer both at the same time, was beyond reason.

Like a flash Bomba slid down the trunk. He picked up his rifle and circled about the biting, tearing, growling beasts, who were rolling over and over like a giant pinwheel.

Bomba darted in and out, looking for a chance to strike. He could not get near enough with his knife to stab. Nor did he dare to fire, for fear of hitting Polulu.

He grasped his rifle near the muzzle and held it high above his head until he saw his opportunity. Then he swung it with tremendous force and brought the heavy butt down on the skull of one of the battling jaguars. It crushed the brute's head, its hold on the puma relaxed, and it lay motionless.

The other jaguar was underneath the puma,

and Bomba could not repeat his blow. But there was no need. For Polulu's teeth had sunk deep into his enemy's throat, and he held on with a grip that nothing could break.

A minute more and the struggles of the jaguar ceased. A tremor ran through the huge body, every muscle relaxed, and the head fell limp. It had stalked its last victim.

The puma lifted itself from the body of its dead foe, staggered a little distance, and began to lick its wounds. Strips had been torn from its hide and it was bleeding in a dozen places.

Bomba ran to the great beast and caressed its shaggy head.

"Good Polulu!" he cried in unsteady tones. "He has saved Bomba's life and Bomba will never forget. There is no puma so brave as Polulu in all the jungle."

Polulu purred throatily and rubbed his head against the lad's hand and then resumed his licking.

Bomba hastened to a wallow near by, scooped up a handful of mud, ran back and applied it to the more serious of the animal's wounds. A careful examination showed him that none of them was mortal.

The strange friendship of the two had begun several years before. On one of his excursions into the jungle, Bomba had found the puma im-

prisoned beneath the trunk of a tree that, in falling, had caught the animal by the leg. The boy had been moved to pity and had freed the broken leg. Then he had set the limb and brought the animal food and water for days until the leg had healed. The brute sensed the boy's kindness of heart and was immensely grateful.

"Polulu shall stay with Bomba through the night," declared the lad. "He is too sore and weak to make his way through the jungle back to his cave. Bomba will put fresh mud upon Polulu's wounds, and in the morning he will be strong again."

The puma seemed to understand and looked at Bomba with a gleam of affection in the yellow eyes, usually so ferocious.

As a matter of precaution, Bomba put a bullet into the heart of the jaguar whose skull he had cracked. Then he gathered fuel and made a roaring fire, cut some of the choicest steaks from the body of one of the jaguars, roasted them and feasted royally, sharing his meal with Polulu.

Then, after redressing Polulu's wounds, Bomba threw himself on the ground to sleep and the puma stretched himself out by the fire. The boy had seldom been so free from care at night in the jungle. Usually he slept "with one eye open," alert for the slightest sound of danger. But with

Polulu on guard Bomba could utterly relax. Nothing could surprise his four-footed sentinel.

So the boy slumbered profoundly and awoke at dawn with strength and vitality thrilling through every nerve of his body.

He fed Polulu, and himself ate heartily. He had cured some of the jaguar meat the night before and this he thrust in his pouch. Then he turned to Polulu, who yawned, stretched himself, and thrust his big muzzle into the boy's hand.

The brute's wounds were healing and it was evident that in a few days he would be himself again. Bomba ran his hand over the puma's head.

"Bomba and Polulu will have to part now," said the lad regretfully. "No," he went on, as the puma begged with his eyes to accompany his friend, "it is on a long journey that Bomba goes and he must travel alone. But Bomba will always keep in his heart what the brave Polulu has done for him, and when he comes back from the Valley of Skulls he hopes to make much talk with Polulu."

He gave the big head one last caress and took up the trail. The puma gazed after the lad until he had disappeared from sight. Then the animal turned and plunged into the jungle.

The rain still held off, and the trail of the enemies was easy for the lad to follow. Again and again he could make out among the larger

footprints of the savages the trim little marks of Pirah's sandals. His heart swelled at the sight. He was rent by the fear of the roughness with which she might have been treated by her unfeeling captors.

In the morning he made rapid progress, because he was traveling through a section of the jungle where the trees and brush were less dense than usual. But in the afternoon the aspect of the region changed and he had to use his machete almost constantly to hack a way for himself through the tangled vines and creepers.

On the next day Bomba noted that the trail was growing fresher. The footprints of the party were more clearly marked. In places where they had gone through a mud wallow the water that had oozed into the depressions had not yet wholly evaporated. The ashes of their campfires, too, became increasingly warm to the touch.

Either the savages had relaxed the speed with which they had started, or the swift gait of Bomba had begun to tell. It was evident that he was rapidly overhauling them.

Now the boy redoubled his caution, and this necessarily reduced his speed. He could no longer swing along at the rate that had eaten up the miles. He scrutinized every thicket, every clump of trees, for fear of some lurking enemy,

some possible ambush. All his ample share of junglecraft was brought into requisition.

At intervals he would select the tallest tree that he could find and climb to the top in order to survey the surrounding country. But on that day nothing out of the ordinary presented itself to his view.

That night he made no fire. Its glow might be seen against the sky and warn the enemy of his presence. For protection against prowling beasts he crept into the recesses of a heavy thorn bush and, with his rifle close at hand, took occasional snatches of sleep.

It was well that he had foregone the fire. For from the very start of the next day's journey the jungle boy realized that he was nearer the country of his foes than he had imagined.

He came across many beaten trails in the jungle leading in different directions. These, he knew, were made by hunters. The number of them showed that he was near the dwelling place of some tribe. At any moment he might come across some member or members of it coming out on an expedition for game. He must avoid this, at any cost. His success in rescuing Pirah and her friends depended absolutely on his presence in that part of the country being unknown.

Against such odds he could not rely on force. His only hope was in craft and stealth.

Twice he climbed trees that morning for purposes of observation. He saw nothing of what he was looking for. But on the third trial, just before noon, his heart beat faster as he saw in the distance a native village, the first sign of human habitation he had come across since the beginning of his quest.

It was far larger than the usual village of the jungle. There seemed to be several hundred huts, bespeaking a population of three or four times that number. Probably a thousand people dwelt in it. And Bomba had the conviction that every one of that thousand would delight in seeing him captured and tortured and killed.

As far as he could judge from that lofty observatory, the village was about four miles away. The party he was pursuing must have long since reached it. Probably it was their tribal headquarters, and it was there, Bomba conjectured, that Pirah and the other captives would be held while their fate was being debated.

Now Bomba was brought face to face with the necessity of immediate action.

He had hoped to overtake the raiding party before it had reached its tribal home. Then the possibility of rescue, though desperate, would have been easier. He would have had perhaps twenty or thirty to outwit. He might have crept into the camp in the darkness of the night, cut

the bonds of the captives and escaped into the jungle. Or he might have overpowered the chief of the party and held him as a hostage. The death-dealing power of his rifle, a weapon which probably these savages had never seen or heard, might throw them into panic. More than once his marvelous courage and cunning stratagems, aided by surprise, had turned the scale in his favor against tremendous odds. At any rate, he would have had a chance.

But what chance did he have now against such a myriad of enemies?

One thing was certain. He must go no further in the daylight. The likelihood of discovery was too great. He must trust to the dark to aid him.

He slid down from the tree, found a secure covert and waited with what patience he could muster until blackness came down on the jungle.

Then he left his hiding place and, as stealthily as a panther, started for the village.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE TOILS

SLOWLY and carefully, Bomba made his way through the jungle. He had fixed the location of the village so accurately in his mind that he could almost have found it with his eyes closed.

A little more than an hour had passed when the trees began to thin out, and he soon found himself on the edge of a clearing. In the distance could be seen a number of twinkling lights, like so many fireflies.

Standing in the deep shadow of one of the trees that fringed the open space, Bomba reconnoitered the expanse that stretched between him and the town. It was a more or less even plateau, covered sparsely with grass and studded at irregular intervals with rocks. He scanned it closely, but could see no moving figures.

In what seemed to be the center of the town a huge fire glowed and sent its glare into the sky. About this he could faintly descry a number of figures that seemed to be indulging in some kind of barbaric dance. As the lad listened he could

hear the sound of tom-toms and of shouting.

Bomba conjectured that the villagers were holding a festival to celebrate the return of the warriors with their captives. A pang shot through his heart at the possibility that those same captives were perhaps affording fiendish delight to their captors by the sight of their sufferings.

But he put this thought out of his mind, for he did not think this was probable. He knew that captives were seldom tortured or killed as soon as they were brought to the tribal haunts. There was usually a certain delay required to notify the whole district of the slaughter that was impending and to prepare an elaborate festival.

Moving with the greatest caution, most of the time on his hands and knees, Bomba wormed his way toward the village. The sounds of revelry grew louder as he approached it.

He covered two-thirds of the space without seeing or hearing the slightest thing to arouse his suspicions. Then, as he was crawling past a huge rock, something heavy came down upon him. He felt a stinging pain in the back of his head, blackness came over his senses and he knew no more.

When Bomba came back to consciousness he found himself lying on his back in an evil-smelling hut. His head was aching. He tried to move,

but found that his hands and feet were securely bound.

It was some time before he realized what had happened. Slowly memory came back to him, the journey to the village partly accomplished, the rock in whose shadow he had been creeping, the stunning blow that had robbed him of his senses.

He had been wrong, then, in thinking that the wary Indians had neglected to post sentries. One of them, perhaps more, had been posted behind that rock.

Bomba's bitter musings were interrupted by a tumult at the door of the hut. A tall savage strode in, followed by half a dozen husky braves who bore torches and all of whom were talking excitedly.

The chief, evidently that because of his assured bearing and the savage regalia that marked him out from his followers, turned angrily about and commanded silence. Then he approached Bomba and stood towering above him.

"So this is the stranger who has dared to come into the land of the Araks!" he said harshly, as he kicked Bomba in the side. "Speak, Gobas, and tell Molamba what the stranger was doing when Gobas captured him."

A powerfully built savage crowded eagerly forward, glad of the chance to curry favor with his chief.

"If Molamba commands his servant to speak," said Gobas, "the stranger was coming from the direction of the place where the servants of Molamba had the fight with the Araos, whom may the gods destroy.

"Gobas was keeping good watch when he saw the stranger come from the shadow of the jungle and creep on hands and knees toward the dwellings of the Araks. Then Gobas laughed to himself and thanked his gods that the enemy was delivered into his hands. He waited till the stranger was near the rock and then smote him with his club. Then Gobas called to others of the servants of Molamba, and they helped Gobas bind the hands and feet of the stranger and they bore him to this place."

"Gobas has done well," commended the chief. "Molamba will command that Gobas receive a bracelet of piranhas' teeth and that he pay no tithe of sheep or goats for twelve moons to come. Now get you hence, for Molamba would have speech with the stranger. But let two of you stand guard at the door, and if they let the prisoner escape, they shall be fed to the lord of the snakes."

What that threat might mean Bomba did not quite understand, but that it was a dreadful one was evident from the expression of horror that came into the faces of the men. They hastened

to obey, after one of them had thrust a lighted torch in a rude clamp attached to the wall of the hut.

Bomba had struggled to a sitting position while this conversation was going on, and now sat regarding the chief steadily.

Molamba stood glowering at the jungle boy with a cruel and ferocious stare. His eyes were like those of a basilisk. Bomba returned stare for stare. It was a duel of eyes, and as moments passed without Bomba letting his eyes fall an expression of surprise came into the saturnine face of the chief.

Here was a prisoner of a sort to which Molamba had not been accustomed. Few of his captives had dared to look him in the face. Instead, they had cringed and cowered, begged and wept. But Bomba was as cool and calm as though he himself held the whip hand.

"Whence comes the stranger, and what name does he bear?" asked Molamba at last.

"The stranger comes from a far country and his name is Bomba," replied the lad.

"To what tribe does Bomba belong?" went on the chief.

"Bomba belongs to no tribe," was the reply. "He is white."

This was received with a grunt of incredul-

lity from the chief, for the lad was as bronzed as any Indian.

"If Molamba will push away the puma skin on Bomba's breast, he will see that Bomba speaks the truth," the lad asserted.

Molamba did as suggested, and the white skin of the boy's chest confirmed the claim.

"What was Bomba doing in the land of the Araks?" was the next question. "Why was he creeping like a snake toward the village of Molamba?"

This was the question that the lad had foreseen and dreaded. He had resolved to acknowledge no connection with Pirah and the other captives. If it were known that he was bent on rescuing them, it would only deepen the resentment of the chief toward himself and hasten the doom of his friends.

"Is not the jungle free to all?" he answered evasively. "Are there any marks that tell Bomba where he ought to stop? If the game run on, shall Bomba not follow? Bomba has done no harm to any of the Araks. He sees strange lights in a strange village. Why should he not creep quietly to see whether there are friends or enemies in the village? Would not Molamba do the same?"

"Silence, dog!" commanded the chief fiercely. "Is it for you to question Molamba? It is for

Molamba to ask and for you to answer. Know you the tribe of the Araos and their chief, Hondura?"

"Who has not heard of them?" replied the lad. "They are known to all the people of the jungle. The ears of Bomba have heard their names many times."

The chief's eyes glared with exasperation at his inability to get at what he wanted.

"The tongue of Bomba is cunning," he sneered. "It says many words and yet it says nothing. It twists and turns like that of a snake."

The utterance of the last word seemed to change for a moment the current of his thoughts, and a malevolent grin curled the corners of his cruel mouth.

"Bomba has hunted in the jungle," he said, "and one who hunts in the jungles sees many things. Has Bomba ever seen the lord of the snakes?"

"Yes," replied the lad, knowing that the chief referred to the anaconda. "Bomba has seen the lord of the snakes."

"It is well," declared the chief, and his wicked grin widened. "Bomba shall see him again. And the lord of the snakes will be very close when Bomba sees him. Molamba has spoken."

He gave the boy a parting kick and strode away, pausing at the doorway to select a couple

of additional men to act as guards, enjoining the most careful watch over the prisoner and accompanying the injunction with bloodcurdling threats, in which Bomba detected another reference to the lord of the snakes.

Following the departure of the chief, the guards extinguished the torch, leaving the interior of the hut in utter darkness. They took up their position at the door and conversed with one another in a low monotone that did not carry to the prisoner within.

Left alone, Bomba communed with his thoughts. They were not pleasant ones. He was in the most desperate situation it was possible to imagine, bound hand and foot, one prisoner among a thousand enemies, absolutely in the power of the most bloodthirsty tyrant of the jungle. He was doomed.

Doomed to what? Once more that prickly feeling ran along his spine as he recalled the chieftain's words:

"The lord of the snakes!"

CHAPTER XIII

A HIDEOUS FOE

BOMBA's sleep that night was broken. His head ached from the blow of the club. The cords that bound his hands and legs had been drawn so tight that they bit cruelly into the flesh.

It was a relief when the first glimmer of dawn stole through the doorway of the hut. Here at least was reality. He knew that that day might be his last, but he faced it with the invincible composure that had grown with him to be second nature.

Rude but abundant food was brought to him by his captors and they loosened the cords about his wrists so that he could eat. And he ate abundantly to give him strength for whatever might await him.

After the meal his bonds were again tightly adjusted. It was evident that the guards were taking no chances.

A little while later there was the beating of drums and tom-toms, and to their barbaric cadences Molamba entered the hut.

In the daylight Bomba was able to study the chief as he had not the night before. Molamba was a man of herculean build, with the long arms of an ape. The face showed simian characteristics also—jutting jaw, flat nose, backward sloping brows. The eyes by themselves would have supplied sufficient explanation of Molamba's leadership of one of the most ferocious of the jungle tribes. In those small, close-set eyes lurked a demon of cruelty. To disobey him was to court certain death, a slow and lingering death at which Molamba would preside, rubbing his hands in gloating. Those of his tribe had found that it was not well to dispute the orders of Molamba.

But there was no flinching in the calm, cool look that Bomba bent upon his captor.

That look infuriated the savage chieftain and he gave Bomba a vicious kick in the side.

"It is easy to strike one that is bound," said Bomba. "Molamba would not dare to do it, if Bomba's hands were free."

There was astonishment blended with rage in the eyes of Molamba. Then he laughed boisterously.

"Molamba would break the strange boy in two as easily as he would snap a twig," he cried contemptuously.

"Molamba speaks big words," replied the lad. "Yet Bomba says again that if Molamba will free

his hands he will fight Molamba with his hands or with his knife and shame him before his braves."

Molamba almost foamed at the mouth at this bold defiance. He was the more enraged because the guards at the door had heard the ringing words of the lad and were looking at their chief curiously. Personal valor was rated highly in the jungle, and he who shrank back from a challenge, no matter what the disparity in rank and reputation, lost just that much in the admiration of his people.

By a great effort Molamba mastered his chagrin.

"The words of Bomba are as idle as the wind," he blustered. "Molamba is a great chief and he would not soil his hands with the scum of the jungle. Molamba has come to see if the stranger's tongue is straight this morning and not crooked as it was last night when Molamba asked him questions. But now it does not matter, for before the sun sets Bomba's tongue shall be still forever."

It was a definite sentence of death and the lad's heart sank. Yet nothing in his look betokened fear. The chief looked at him curiously.

"Would Bomba fight for his life?" he asked.

"Bomba has fought for his life many times,"

replied the lad. "Yes, Bomba will fight with Molamba or any of his braves."

"Bomba shall fight," he decreed.

"And if he wins, shall he go free?" asked the lad.

The question seemed to amuse the chief. A broad grin spread over his brutish face.

"Bomba will not win," he chuckled. "Bomba will fight with an enemy that he cannot kill. He shall fight with the lord of the snakes."

Again that ominous phrase!

A battle with an anaconda! The full horror of the threat burst upon the jungle boy.

Yet he refused to quail before the gloating eyes of his captor.

"It is well," he said calmly. "Give Bomba his bow and arrows or his fire stick and he will fight with the lord of the snakes."

"Bomba shall not have his bow and arrows or his fire stick," replied Molamba. "But he shall have his knife. He has boasted about fighting Molamba with his knife, and with his knife he shall fight the lord of the snakes."

A knife alone against an anaconda that moved with the swiftness of lightning and could throw its crushing coils about him in the twinkling of an eye! Why not ask him to fight the reptile with his bare hands?

But Bomba knew why his knife was left him. It

would be comparatively tame for the spectators to see him devoured without a struggle. It would be much rarer sport to see the victim making futile stabs at the monster, to which the blows would be as pin pricks. How they would laugh and nudge each other as they watched his agonies! It would be a glorious festal day, one long to be remembered and chuckled over in the annals of the tribe.

The eye of the chief was upon him, and Bomba would have died rather than have shown the slightest semblance of fear. On the contrary he summoned up a yawn.

"Where shall Bomba fight the lord of the snakes?" he asked indifferently.

Unwilling admiration showed in the eyes of the guards and even Molamba showed a glimmer of it that he quickly repressed.

"In the village," the chief answered. "The people of Molamba found him in the jungle when he had just swallowed a deer and was gorged and heavy with sleep. They bound him to a long pole and brought him here to make sport with. He has been here now many days and he is hungry. He will be glad when he sees Bomba," he ended, with a horrid chuckle.

"It is well," said Bomba, with another yawn. "The lord of the snakes shall feel the edge of

Bomba's knife. Bomba is ready now, if Molamba wills."

He let himself down to the floor from his sitting position and, lying on his back, gazed indifferently into the eyes of the chief.

"It will be soon enough," snapped Molamba grimly, irritated beyond measure by his failure to break the boy's spirit. "The people of Molamba will gather together as soon as the midday meal is over. Then they will watch the lord of the snakes wind himself about Bomba and crush his bones and satisfy his hunger."

He turned upon his heel and stalked out of the hut.

Bomba still maintained his mask of impassivity, because he knew that the guards were watching him. But beneath that mask his mind was in a tumult. Death threatened him in one of its most horrible and repulsive forms.

The thought of death was as repellent to Bomba as to any other normal young being. But he had faced it so often that he had become inured to it. It was not his own probable fate that oppressed him now so much as it was the fact that, with him dead, Pirah and her companions would be deprived of his help in freeing themselves from their enemies.

To be sure, there was the chance of Hondura and his people coming to the little girl's rescue.

But even if they should come, they might be too late. Also, it was more than likely that their very appearance in the neighborhood would cause the Araks to put Pirah instantly to death. And with her would die the faithful Gibo, Ashati and Neram.

Then, too, there was the possibility that Lodo might never have reached Hondura with the news of Pirah's capture. In his partly crippled condition, he might have been killed by some beast of the jungle before he reached the maloca of Hondura.

But all these conjectures were futile. Brooding on them might cloud his mind, abate his cunning, diminish his strength. He needed all those qualities in the fullest measure. Resolutely he braced himself for the fearful ordeal that lay before him.

Midday came and passed. Bomba could hear outside the hut the clamor of laughing Indians, the tread of many feet as they hurried to the place of combat. The news of it had spread like wildfire and none wanted to be cheated of the spectacle. They were evidently expecting a great treat.

At about midafternoon the chief entered the hut, his face bearing an evil smile. He, too, was looking forward to the fight with as keen a zest as any of his people.

Molamba motioned to one of his attendants to cut the cords that held Bomba in bondage. The man did so.

"It is time," said Molamba. "Come."

Bomba struggled to his feet, upon which he had all he could do to stand. They were stiff and cramped from his bonds and his arms felt lifeless.

He began to rub his arms and legs vigorously to restore the circulation.

"Why does Bomba tarry?" demanded the chief impatiently. "Did not Molamba say come?"

"He fears the lord of the snakes," remarked grinningly one of the natives.

"Bomba fears naught," said the lad calmly. "But he cannot walk until the blood has come back into his veins."

"Bomba speaks well," agreed Molamba. "It is meet that his legs grow strong so that he can run fast when he sees the lord of the snakes coming to devour him. It will make much laughter for the people of Molamba."

The lad paid no attention to the gibe, but continued rubbing and stamping until he felt that his limbs were ready to do his bidding.

"Now," he said, "Bomba is ready. Give Bomba his knife."

"Not so," replied the chief. "If Bomba had his knife now, he might use it on one of Molamba's

people. He shall have it when he reaches the place of the fight."

They passed out of the hut, Bomba in the center of a strong guard that made the slightest attempt at escape impossible.

In a little while they reached a compound about a hundred feet square, surrounded by a strong palisade of logs. It was in a depression of the ground, so that everything that took place in it was clearly visible to the throngs that stood about on the higher ground that overlooked it.

A rude platform had been erected outside the compound for the accommodation of Molamba and some of his favorites. Here the chief took his place, to be joined speedily by several others.

Among these Bomba noticed a man who seemed to him to be white. Closer inspection showed him, however, that the man had a trace of Indian blood. His face was as evil as those of the Araks by whom he was surrounded, but there were traces of a keener intelligence in it that marked him out from the others.

But Bomba had little time to ponder on that. At a command from the chief the lad was thrust roughly into the compound through a rude door that was promptly barred behind him. His knife was thrown to him over the palisade. He was alone in the compound.

Yet not alone!

Over in one corner of the compound there was a huge strongly constructed cage in which some living thing was moving.

Through the narrow spaces between the logs that formed the cage, Bomba caught glimpses of a great brown body, as thick as a roll of oilcloth, winding and twisting about in horrid undulations.

The lord of the snakes!

Two natives from the palisade above pulled on ropes that lifted upward the door of the cage.

A fearful fascination held Bomba's eyes riveted on that open space.

From it emerged a frightful head, followed by a thick body at least twenty-five feet-long.

The anaconda rolled along lazily, as though scarcely conscious yet that it was free. It looked hither and thither at the crowd that overlooked the compound and hissed angrily.

Then the snake saw Bomba!

CHAPTER XIV

THE WHIRLING KNIFE

THE anaconda threw itself into a coil and upreared its horrid head. From the slaving jaws came a horrible sound, half hiss, half bellow, as it surveyed its foe.

Bomba stood as rigid as a statue at his end of the compound—so rigid in fact that the reptile seemed to wonder for a moment whether he were in fact a living thing waiting to be devoured.

It was Bomba himself who resolved the doubt, He tossed the knife high into the air and caught it deftly by the haft as it came down. Then he shook it menacingly at the monster and shouted defiance.

A shout of delight had gone up from the crowd when it had seen the reptile catch sight of the lad and throw itself into a coil. This promised action. They were wild with expectation and delight.

But Bomba's nonchalant tossing of the knife and the taunt he hurled at his scaly foe bewildered them and hushed them into breathless

silence. Was the boy mad? Had the ordeal turned his brain? Why did he not cringe and cower and weep? Why did he not fall on his knees and beseech his gods for help?

The anaconda had thrown itself down and was now moving rapidly in Bomba's direction.

Still the lad waited—waited till the anaconda was but ten feet away and had upreared its head to strike.

Then, like a flash, Bomba turned and ran at right angles to the further end of the enclosure.

Now the yells of the crowd rose to an ecstatic volume. The boy had run! The chase was on! This was going to be no tame affair. The sport promised to be gloriously exciting.

The exasperated reptile again threw itself down and hurried in pursuit of its agile prey.

Again it coiled and reared; again Bomba dodged and ran; again the crowd yelled in glee. This was going to be a memorable day in the sport annals of the Araks.

To them the boy's flight was that of a tortured thing that had given up all hope and was simply trying to stave off the inevitable end. But to Bomba himself it had a wholly different meaning.

He knew that the snake's strength would outlast his own; that sooner or later, if the chase persisted, the reserves of vitality in the reptile's sinewy body would overbalance his.

He was not aiming to weary the snake. He wanted to anger it. He knew that in the reptile world, as well as the human, the advantage remained to the cooler opponent. Anger clouded the judgment, decreased the cunning.

Half a dozen times he waited; half a dozen times he retreated.

The next time he did not retreat. The reptile halted uncertainly as it saw that its adversary really intended to maintain his ground. Was it a ruse?

So the head again towered aloft, but not with the lightning swiftness of the first attack, so that the long neck offered a fair target.

A gleaming blade flashed in the sunlight as it whizzed through the air. Bomba had hurled the knife with unerring aim and all the power of his muscular arm. It shot across the intervening space and sliced the snake's head from its body!

The huge coils thrashed about furiously and Bomba had to dodge swiftly to avoid being entangled in them. The severed head thumped the ground aimlessly a few times and then lay still.

The crowd for a moment had remained as still as death, paralyzed at what had happened. It seemed impossible to believe their eyes. Then, as the truth forced itself upon the watchers, a wild volume of shouts rose to the skies, shouts of bewilderment, consternation, unwilling admiration.

Bomba stooped down and impaled the monster's head on his knife. He carried the ghastly trophy across the field until he stood directly beneath the platform on which Molamba and his friends were standing, bending forward, their eyes almost bulging from their sockets.

"Here is something for Molamba," the lad said, as he tossed the head from the point of his knife up on the platform. "Does Bomba now go free?"

The chief stood there, apparently tongue-tied. His mind was a confused tumult of emotions. Rage that his victim had escaped the death he had decreed for him; fear that perhaps the only explanation was that the captive was under the direct protection of the gods; uncertainty as to the feeling of his people, to whom the nerve and skill of the lad in his gallant fight could not fail to make some appeal.

He played for time.

"Take him back to the hut," he commanded the guards. "Molamba will say later what shall be done with him."

The order was obeyed, the braves closed about him and Bomba was led back to his place of imprisonment. He noticed that this time he was no longer roughly hustled about and that in the eyes of his guardians was something of awe, almost of fear.

Even when they again tied his hands and feet they touched him deferentially, and though they made the knots secure they saw that they did not bite into the flesh. It would be just as well not to gain any more of the enmity of this marvelous boy than they could help in carrying out the commands of their chief. Might he not be a wizard? At the very least, the gods must favor him, if they permitted him to gain a victory over the lord of the snakes.

In Bomba's heart was great elation. He had passed a fearful test successfully and was still alive. He waited impatiently for the next word from Molamba.

It came that night soon after Bomba had eaten a hearty supper. To the usual ruffle of drums and tom-toms the chief entered the hut.

To Bomba's surprise, Molamba was not alone. He was accompanied by the man whom Bomba had seen on the platform that afternoon and whom the boy had mistaken for a white. On closer inspection Bomba did not wonder that he had erred. The white blood undoubtedly predominated. Only his nose and hair were undeniably Indian.

What struck Bomba as odd was the lack of the usual ferocity and arrogance in the eyes of Molamba. Those qualities were still there, but strangely tempered and subdued. He showed an

unusual deference toward his companion and acted as if he were uneasily conscious of being in the presence of a superior.

"Molamba has come," announced the chief. "He has brought with him Tom Paul, who would speak with Bomba."

The eyes of Bomba and the half-breed met and held for several seconds.

"It is well," said the newcomer. "Molamba may go now, for Tom Paul would speak with the white boy alone."

Again Bomba was astounded at the meekness with which the dreaded chief took the curt dismissal. He bowed his head and strode from the hut without a word.

The lad's curiosity was strangely stirred. Who was this man who spoke to the chief of the Araks as sharply as he would have spoken to the meanest member of the tribe? Was it his own personality that commanded and received such deference? Or did he represent some greater power before which Molamba bowed in awe?

The face of the stranger relaxed from its sternness into a friendly smile. That smile atoned for much of the coldness and mercilessness that seemed to be native to his eyes.

"The white boy is brave," he said, as he seated himself on the floor beside the lad, who was leaning in a sitting position against a wall of the hut.

"Tom Paul would not have believed that there was one in all the jungle that could meet and conquer the lord of the snakes. He knows of none who would not have lost his head or his courage. He had seen knives thrown, but never with the aim and force of the knife that left the hand of Bomba."

The tribute was sincere, whatever might be the motive back of it, and Bomba could not help a glow of grateful feeling. It was a long time since he had heard a word spoken in friendliness.

"It was naught," he said modestly. "Bomba had to kill the snake or it would have killed him. Who would not fight to save his life?"

"It is the white blood in Bomba that helped him to fight so bravely," returned Tom Paul, and this time instead of using the native tongue he spoke in English—a fact that thrilled the lad with surprise and gladness. "Tom Paul is almost white and he speaks as a white man and thinks as a white man."

Bomba's heart bounded anew. Why, this man was a brother—or almost a brother. There was a bond of kinship between them.

A crafty gleam came into the half-breed's eyes as he noted the impression he had made, but the gleam vanished in an instant.

"How did the white boy find himself in the jungle among the natives?" asked Tom Paul.

"How is it that he is not living with the white people in some white country, in England, in France, in America—"

The last word went through the boy like an electric shock.

"America!" he interrupted excitedly. "That is where Bomba's people lived. Has Tom Paul ever been in America?"

"Yes," replied the half-breed. "Tom Paul was once a sailor and has been in America."

"Then you may have seen my father!" cried the lad. "His name is Bartow. And my mother. Her name is Laura. Tell me. Has Tom Paul seen them?"

CHAPTER XV

THE DREADFUL VALLEY

THERE was a world of pathos in the eager question of the heart-hungry jungle boy, but it failed to touch the heart of stone to which it was addressed. Yet the tone of Tom Paul was gentle as he replied:

"America is a big place. The people there are as many as the trees of the jungle. No, Tom Paul has not seen Bartow or Laura. But he wishes that he had seen them, so that he could ease the heart of Bomba. Let Bomba tell Tom Paul about his father and mother, and if Tom Paul ever does see them or hear of them he will bring the news of them to Bomba."

The words were so kindly and sympathetic that they called forth a ready response from the boy, unleashed a flood of memories and longings. He poured these out freely to the white, or nearly white, man. There seemed to be no reason why he should not do so. Perhaps this man might help.

So he told of the life he had known since in-

fancy, his long residence in the jungle with only the old naturalist as his intimate companion, his combats with beasts and reptiles, headhunters and cannibals, his growing longing to know about his parentage, the half-demented state of Casson that had prevented his receiving the information he wanted, his fruitless journeys in search of that knowledge to the Moving Mountain, the Giant Cataract, Sobrinini's domain, Jaguar Island and the Abandoned City.

The half-breed listened with apparent sympathy and with the keenest interest. He paid special attention to the story that had been gleaned from the incomplete pages of the diary of Japazy, the source from which Bomba had gathered most of his information about his parents. When Bomba spoke of the picture of the lovely woman whom Bomba believed to be his mother, the half-breed asked to see it, and when Bomba produced it from the waterproof case beneath his puma skin in which he always carried it, his visitor examined it with the utmost care, as though seeking to impress the features upon his memory.

At last Bomba concluded, and by that time the half-breed knew almost as much about the lad's parents and personal history as Bomba himself.

Bomba attributed all of the interest shown to his visitor's goodness of heart, not suspecting for

a moment any ulterior purpose. Now that he had unburdened his heart, his thoughts turned again to his present plight.

"Does Tom Paul know what Molamba is planning to do with Bomba?" he asked. "Will Molamba keep him captive or kill him or let him go free?"

The half-breed shook his head.

"Tom Paul does not know," he replied. "Molamba will do what he wills to do."

"But Molamba is not as strong as Tom Paul," the lad said. "Bomba has seen how Molamba obeyed when Tom Paul spoke. Why should not Tom Paul tell Molamba that Bomba must be set free?"

"It is not that Tom Paul is strong that Molamba obeys him," the half-breed said. "It is because Tom Paul comes from one that Molamba fears, one who rules the Valley of Skulls."

The lad looked his surprise. He had thought that Molamba was the sole ruler of that dreadful valley.

"Who is this man that is so strong that Molamba fears him?" he asked.

"He is a white man, and he has great power," replied the half-breed. "The Araks are but the tribe that guards the entrance to the valley. They do the bidding of the white man because

they think that he is a magician and will put evil spells upon them if they disobey."

"But if he is a white man, he must be a good man," said the boy, in the innocence of his heart, for he had formed an exalted opinion of everything that was white. "Why, then, does he rule over a place that has such evil fame as the Valley of Skulls?"

The half-breed had difficulty in repressing a smile.

"Yes, he is a good man," he answered gravely. "If any one says aught else, it is because he does not know. But Tom Paul must go now. He will do all he can to get Molamba to let Bomba go free."

"It is good of Tom Paul to speak such words," said the boy. "One more question would Bomba ask. Does Tom Paul know aught of people captured by the Araks, a little girl and three braves of a stranger tribe?"

For a moment the half-breed turned the question over in his mind as though undetermined whether or not to answer.

"There are some things that Tom Paul may not say," he finally replied. "Yet this thing he will tell. Yes, Tom Paul does know of the captives of whom Bomba speaks."

"Are they still alive?" asked Bomba eagerly.

"They live," declared the half-breed. He rose

to his feet as though to forestall further questions. "No more than this will Tom Paul say. It is not well to have too loose a tongue. Bomba will hear from Tom Paul again."

He went out of the hut, leaving Bomba with plenty to occupy his thoughts.

His chief feeling was one of elation at knowing that little Pirah and his faithful friends were still alive. There was still a chance of rescue or escape or of ransom.

But as he reviewed in his mind the conversation that had just taken place a certain feeling of uneasiness crept in. Had he been too ready to take this strange man into his confidence, to tell him all the events of his life and his quest for his parents? Was the man to be depended on? Had his friendliness been pretended or real?

If he were really a good man, what was he doing among these cruel and bloodthirsty savages? Why was he serving the dreaded ruler of the Valley of Skulls? And what manner of man was this ruler himself, who had such a sinister reputation as a magician?

These were not pleasant thoughts, and Bomba tried to drive them from his mind. But they would not be so easily dismissed. They were with him when he went to sleep, they were with him in his dreams, they were with him still when he woke.

And they gained added force when day after day went by without any word from Tom Paul. To be sure, his life had been spared. Perhaps he owed that to the half-breed. But no word came of the hoped-for freedom. He was watched as carefully as ever, his hands and feet were still bound, and to all appearances his captivity might endure indefinitely.

Then, one morning, there was a stir in the village. Something was afoot. The guards at the door were looking at the renewed activity of the maloca with interest, glancing frequently over their shoulders into the dim interior of the hut as though to assure themselves that the prisoner was still there, safely bound and available at a moment's notice.

"There is movement among the people," muttered Bomba to himself. "Perhaps before the sun is well overhead Bomba will know what awaits him."

Two messengers stopped in front of the hut.

"Come!" said one of them gruffly.

"Loosen the cords that bind Bomba's legs and he will come," answered the lad.

The savage stooped and loosened them, but did not remove them. He left enough slack so that Bomba could walk but could not run.

"Whither is Bomba going?" asked the lad, as he rose to his feet.

"To the Valley of Skulls, from which none comes back alive," the man replied.

The Valley of Skulls! The valley said by the natives to be peopled with unimaginable horrors, where the streams were poisonous, where monsters abounded, where the flowers were deadly to the touch, where the morasses were traps for the feet of the unwary!

But if any savage expected to see any trace of fear in Bomba's features, he was disappointed.

"Lead on," the lad said. "Bomba will follow."

He was taken at once to the more pretentious dwelling of Molamba, at the door of which the chief stood waiting for him.

Molamba glowered at him. Bomba returned the glance with maddening calm. The chief gritted his teeth.

He clapped his hands and a small bodyguard of warriors appeared, armed with heavy spears and with bows and arrows and daubed with paint.

"Take him," Molamba said, pointing to Bomba. "If he escape, the lives of all of you shall pay for it."

The warriors closed about Bomba and their leader gave the signal for the march.

So this was the freedom that the half-breed had promised to help secure for him! Bomba thought bitterly. Freedom to be taken to a fate that Molamba regarded as worse than death!

The Arak warriors followed a trail that seemed to be well known to them, though it was scarcely discernible. The forest was an almost impenetrable tangle of tough vines, fallen trees and heavy brush. Yet the Indians threaded their way swiftly and surely, skirting deadly morasses, finding a trail with the sureness of hounds.

Then, as the trees thinned a little, they came upon a scene that sent a thrill of horror through Bomba's veins.

He and his captors were entering a veritable avenue of skulls!

Human skulls they were, stuck upright on poles, a long double row of them extending for several hundred yards.

The grinning heads seemed to leer at Bomba as he passed shudderingly among them.

These skulls were once those of living men, thought the lad, filled with hopes and fears, ambitions and desires like Bomba's own.

How long would it be before his own head would decorate a pole—just one more grinning skull in that fearful avenue?

CHAPTER XVI

A STROKE FOR FREEDOM

THE savages pressed on, so accustomed to the grisly sight of these rows of grinning skulls that it no longer stirred either their interest or their fear.

At last the long avenue of skulls was left behind. But more horrors were in store for the prisoner. Skeletons strewed the ground on every hand. Some were the skeletons of beasts and reptiles. But others, as Bomba saw too well, were the pitiful remains of human beings. In one place was a great heap of them, the bones picked clean by the carrion birds.

Had little Pirah's terrified eyes been forced to look upon this awful spectacle? Bomba's heart swelled with rage against the monster who ruled the place.

Once he stumbled over a heap of bones that lay directly in his path. A warrior straightened him up with the point of a spear that penetrated his shoulder.

"Huh!" grunted the Indian, with a demoniac

grin as he pointed to the bones, "Bomba will soon be like these."

Bomba gave the man a glance of disdain and went on, his glance fixed upon the ground in front of him. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he scarcely felt the smart of the wound from which the blood dripped sluggishly.

From the place where they had come upon the avenue of skulls, the descent into the valley had been steady and swift.

Now Bomba found himself once more in a heavily wooded region. To his surprise, he saw that practically all the trees were rubber trees. He knew little of the ways of civilization, but he had learned that the gum-like sap of these trees was valued by the white man and the native trader. The row upon row of trees reaching farther than he could see roused the interest of the jungle boy and set him to wondering anew as to the identity of the strange white man who, Tom Paul had intimated, ruled the valley.

In what seemed to be the heart of the plantation, Bomba's captors halted. Here was a small clearing, dotted with tents of a size and shape such as Bomba had never before seen.

Before one of the tents were several rude benches and a table made of logs. In the clearing a number of miserable natives shuffled to and fro bearing buckets filled with the sap from the

rubber trees. These burdened figures Bomba scanned carefully, but none of them bore any resemblance to Gibo, Ashati or Neram.

A spear point pricked Bomba's back. He moved forward to a table at which was sitting a man whose features Bomba could not discern owing to the shapeless hat drawn down over the brow. At the table the escort stopped. The paint-smeared warriors lined up rigidly and the leader spoke:

"We have brought the prisoner. Now would we go back in peace to Molamba, chief of the Arak tribe."

"You have done well."

The man behind the table looked up. To his surprise, Bomba saw that this was no stranger, but the half-breed, Tom Paul.

Recognition flashed instantly into the eyes of the man who was part white, part Indian.

"Ah, Bomba has come," said Tom Paul softly. "Said I not that we would meet again? Bomba must be tired with so much traveling. Let him sit down."

He turned to the leader of the Araks.

"Tom Paul is pleased with you," he said. "Return to your chief and tell him that the prisoner is safe in the Valley of Skulls. To-morrow the big boss will send to the maloca of Molamba the silver and gold that he has promised."

So that was it, Bomba thought to himself. He had been ransomed with money from the power of Molamba. Tom Paul had told his story to the white man who ruled the valley, and the man's heart had been stirred with pity for the jungle boy's plight. Doubtless the next step would be to set him free.

He was destined to a rude awakening.

The leader of the warriors signified that the half-breed's message was satisfactory. He turned and, followed by the others, disappeared among the trees.

Bomba was left alone on the far side of the table, facing Tom Paul.

"It was good of Tom Paul to take Bomba from the power of the cruel Molamba," said the lad gratefully. "It brings joy to Bomba's heart to know that he is free."

The half-breed regarded the lad thoughtfully.

"What is it that makes Bomba think that he is free?" he asked.

"Why else was Bomba taken from the power of Molamba?" asked the boy bewilderedly.

"That he might be brought into the hands of the big boss," was the calm reply.

"But the big boss is white, and Bomba too is white," protested Bomba. "Are not all the whites brothers in heart?"

The half-breed smiled at the innocence of the lad. His mouth was a cruel slit in his face.

"The anaconda is fierce," he said. "Molamba is fierce. But their fierceness is as that of children to the fierceness of the big boss. What he may do with Bomba, Tom Paul does not know. But, until he says the word, Bomba is as much a prisoner here as he was when he was in the maloca of Molamba."

Anger surged through the boy's veins. Had his hands been free, he would have thrown himself on the half-breed and throttled him.

Perhaps Tom Paul read his mind. The half-breed scarcely seemed to move, yet suddenly Bomba found himself staring into something round and hard and black.

Bomba was no stranger to the revolver. He had handled it on occasion himself with deadly effect.

His gaze lifted from the bit of metal in Tom Paul's hand to Tom Paul's face. The half-breed still smiled with his lips, but his eyes had the venom of a snake's.

"Bomba is thinking of attack and escape," he sneered. "Let Tom Paul tell Bomba something. No one has ever escaped from the Valley of Skulls. Look!"

He clapped his hands sharply together. From behind trees, as though conjured by some trick

of sorcery, stepped a dozen painted savages, armed with spears, bows and arrows, and rifles.

"Tell me, Bomba," the half-breed jeered, "does Bomba still think he can escape?"

Bomba's eyes swept the ring of savages and then came to rest gravely upon Tom Paul.

"Yes," said he calmly. "Bomba will escape."

The smile left the face of Tom Paul. Another clap of his hands brought the ring of savages closer around Bomba.

"Bomba needs a lesson," he snarled. "If Bomba is like the wild jaguar of the jungle, Bomba must be tamed." He motioned to one of the savages, who seized the boy roughly by the shoulder.

"Take him to the prison tent," directed the half-breed. "Make him fast with chains to the staple. He is dangerous."

The boy was dragged away and thrust into one of the tents. There a heavy chain was fastened about his wrist and the other end attached to an iron staple driven deeply into the ground.

The chain was thick and stout. Bomba must be strong indeed to break it!

Before the entrance to the tent two guards were stationed. From where he stood, Bomba could see the brown, broad backs half turned toward him; and he remembered the dozen or more

armed savages who had sprung from the ground, as it were, at Tom Paul's bidding.

"Bomba said that he would escape," thought the lad to himself. "But how?"

In desperation, he flung himself upon the ground. As he did so despair gave place to an incredulous hope.

Could he have been mistaken?

For a considerable time Bomba lay motionless. The hope that flooded him was so keen as to be pain. He was almost afraid to put it to the test.

Had the staple actually yielded to his weight as he had thrown himself down?

He waited till the warriors who had been set to guard him moved a few feet from the tent flap. Then, while they talked together, Bomba moved over to the staple.

He had not been mistaken! Ever so slightly, it yielded to his tug!

Bomba remembered the tremor of the earth he had felt in his hut the night before. He was in a volcanic region where such quakes were frequent. Had this last shock loosened the earth about the staple?

The thought came to Bomba that, if he could complete the work begun by the elements, there was a chance that he might escape from this fearful valley of death.

But he did not hope too much. Hampered by

the chain about his wrist, forced to drag the heavy staple with him when he made his dash for liberty, the odds would be heavily against him.

Little by little he worked at the staple. Gradually it loosened in the ground until the lad felt that by the greatest exertion of his strength he would be able to drag it free.

The hours passed and dusk began to gather. Food was brought to him and he ate with a resigned air to quiet the suspicions of his enemies.

On the edge of the evening, during that breathless period when the jungle day drops abruptly into night, Tom Paul came to the tent.

Bomba was reclining on his side, as close to the staple as he could to hide any signs of tampering.

The half-breed looked down on Bomba with a malicious smile and stirred his chains with the point of his boot.

"So Bomba wishes to escape!" he taunted the lad.

The jungle lad lay quiet, his face expressionless.

"Soon you shall go before the big boss," said Tom Paul, "and he will decide what to do with Bomba."

He turned away and without another word strode from the tent.

Darkness spread like a blanket over the rubber plantation. Fires were lighted and Bomba could

see groups of warriors and slaves squatting about them.

After a long time the fires died down. The time had come to act.

With one tremendous effort Bomba jerked the staple free. It was a heavy iron bar with a ring to which the chain was attached.

The lad stood upon his feet and stretched his cramped muscles. He was thankful that the bonds had been removed from hands and legs, the chain having been deemed sufficient to hold him. Exultation flooded him.

Silently he crept toward the flap of the tent.

Nothing stirred in the silent night. Forward again, making no sound.

A faint rustling outside warned him. He had only time to throw himself down, simulating slumber, when a torch flared at the opening of the tent.

A brutish face peered above that torch at the quiet form of the captive. For a full minute Bomba bore that steady scrutiny. Not by so much as the twitch of a muscle did he betray his consciousness of it.

The torch disappeared. Again all was silent.

After a long time Bomba crept once more to the entrance. Two savages squatted with their backs toward him.

A blow with the iron bar stretched one of

them senseless on the ground. The second sprang up with a grunt that died in his throat as another stroke laid him low.

No cry had broken the silence. The attack had been too lightning swift for that.

But Bomba, as he crouched listening, was suddenly aware of noises. The night was full of them, a whispering and a rustling as of snakes slithering through the underbrush.

A less trained ear might have thought it only the sougling of the wind through the trees.

But Bomba knew better. His enemies were upon him.

Above the dying fire a ring of fiendish faces, appearing out of nowhere, gazed at him. A dozen weapons held him covered.

Bomba raised the iron staple; then dropped it. To battle against such odds meant certain death.

A figure pushed forward. It was Tom Paul.

CHAPTER XVII

MAN OR DEMON

"So Bomba still hopes to escape!" jeered the half-breed. "He breaks out of prison carrying his chains with him. We need a stronger jail for such as Bomba."

He regarded the boy for a moment through narrowed eyes.

"If Tom Paul were to give the word, Bomba would be torn with bullets," he said.

Bomba straightened.

"I have seen men die by the fire stick," he said calmly. "It is an easy death."

An involuntary gleam of admiration came into the half-breed's eyes.

"Bomba's courage will not be put to that test," he said. "Tom Paul has just heard from the big boss. For some reason he is not ready for you yet to die."

He clapped his hands and the ring of Indians closed around Bomba.

"Unfasten the chain from his wrist," Tom Paul directed. "He goes to the big boss. Tie

his hands tightly and his legs loosely so that he may take steps. Put him among you and follow me."

With Tom Paul leading the way, Bomba, surrounded by armed warriors, plunged into the jungle toward the dwelling place of the "big boss."

His curiosity concerning this white man who ruled the valley revived. Tom Paul had said that this man desired to save his, Bomba's life. What reason was there for this clemency, which he had so seldom extended to other unfortunates who fell into his merciless hands?

The trail was long and tedious and fraught on every side with unseen dangers. Once Bomba slipped, and instantly his foot was caught in clinging mud. The bog sucked at him greedily, but rough hands pulled him out and thrust him on his way.

They traveled for a considerable distance on this trail, then they came once more upon a clearing. As they did so a bony hand struck Bomba full in the face.

As the lad sprang aside a low laugh sounded close beside him.

"Ah, Bomba," said the voice of the half-breed, "it is nothing but the skeleton of a man who was once an enemy of the big boss. The boss strung him up there long ago by the neck and left him

there for his bones to bleach in the sun and storm. Bomba is not afraid of the living. Is he afraid of the dead?"

"It is in truth a place of the dead," muttered the youth.

"The Valley of Skulls!" said Tom Paul, with a hateful chuckle that made Bomba's flesh creep.

They came at last to a large house of white stone. Moonlight sifted wanly through the trees, and by its radiance the stone shone with a weird, uncanny beauty.

"It is like a house for ghosts," murmured Bomba.

"Bomba will find that the big boss is no ghost," said Tom Paul. "In a moment Bomba will see."

In at a gate they went and up a long flight of shallow steps. A door gaped open and behind it was a vault of blackness.

Tom Paul clapped his hands and instantly there was light. A torch appeared, borne aloft in the hand of a trembling old crone.

"I would have speech with the big boss," said Tom Paul.

The hand of the old woman shook so that the torch danced and flickered against the shadows behind her.

"The boss will see no one," she said in a thin, cracked voice. "He is resting."

"Tell him," said Tom Paul, "that I have brought him the jungle boy, Bomba."

The crone hesitated, then hobbled off, the light bobbing and dancing about her.

A long wait followed. Tom Paul fumed at the delay, stamping up and down, muttering to himself. Bomba stood motionless, with the stoicism bred in him by many years in the jungle.

At last the old woman and the torch reappeared. She gestured with a skinny finger and mouthed the word "Come."

Bomba followed the flaring light down a wide stone corridor. Tom Paul walked beside him, followed by the Indian braves.

At last the corridor turned sharply. To the right of him Bomba saw another stone passage, shorter than the first and ending in a lighted doorway.

Toward this the woman led them. At the threshold she stepped aside. Tom Paul seized Bomba by the arm and led him into the lighted room.

Instantly something huge and snarling flung itself at Bomba, bearing him to the floor.

A crushing weight was on the lad's chest; hot animal breath was in his face.

The attack had been so sudden that the boy had had no chance to guard against it. He struggled to get his hands free so that he could grapple with

the brute, but his bonds held. The jaws bit into his shoulder, tried to reach his throat.

Then a thunderous voice cried:

"Back, son of a demon! Back to your corner! Do you dare to spring before your master orders? Do you want to feel the point of my knife at your throat?"

Bomba staggered to his feet as the weight was lifted from him and stared at an incredible tableau.

A giant of a man stood in the center of the torch-illuminated room. The man's arm was raised above his head and his hand clutched the handle of a rawhide whip.

Before him cowered a huge mastiff, the largest that Bomba had ever seen. Its eyes gleamed with anger at the man who flourished the whip. But they were full of fear, too, fear of some force and authority in the human animal before which it cowered. Inch by inch, the dog gave ground before the man until it crouched, snarling, in a corner.

That slow retreat instead of instant obedience roused the master into fury.

"Chain this beast," he commanded, and some of the warriors sprang to do his bidding, fastening the brute to a chain and staple in the wall.

Then Bomba was treated to an exhibition of cruelty that sickened him and filled him with blind

fury against the man who was called the "big boss."

Again and again the whip came down upon the hide of the mastiff, while the great animal reared and lunged against the chain that made it powerless to defend itself. The whip hand of the man rose and fell with rhythmic regularity until the hide of the mastiff was stained with blood.

Bomba had fought against the beasts of the jungle only when his own life or that of a friend was at stake. Then the fight was a fair one with victory to the strongest.

But this was no fair fight; it was slaughter. Bomba detested cruelty with all his soul.

He leaped forward.

"Stop!" he cried. "You will kill the beast."

A blow intended for the mastiff fell on Bomba's shoulders. The lad winced but stood his ground.

"Out of my way!" roared the man. "I have not done yet. I will teach the accursed beast who is his master."

The whip was raised aloft again, but Bomba did not stir. In sheer astonishment the man stared at the lad who dared to question his will.

"Would you take the punishment of the mastiff?" he roared. "Out of my way or you shall suffer for it."

"If you would kill the beast," returned Bomba

calmly, "the sharp point of the machete would be the kinder way. See! It is covered with blood."

"When you have seen what my whip can do, do you still dare to brave it?" the man shouted. "Out of my way!"

At this point Tom Paul stepped up to the tyrant and put his hand lightly on his arm.

"This is Bomba," he said. "Did I not tell you, Don Mendoza, that he had the courage of the jungle cat? Are there not better things to do with him than kill him? Do you not remember what we said concerning him?"

The arm of Pierre Mendoza, the "big boss" of all who dwelt in the Valley of Skulls, fell slowly to his side. His eyes narrowed as he studied the sturdy figure and bronzed face of the jungle boy.

Bomba, for his part, saw a man of magnificent physique, broad-shouldered, thick-sinewed. Pierre Mendoza must have stood a good six feet three inches without his boots and he carried his height and bulk with grace and suppleness.

The name indicated that he was of both French and Spanish extraction, and his face mirrored characteristics of both nations. His eyes were black and fringed with lashes seemingly too heavy and curling for a man, but this suggestion of effeminacy was immediately contradicted by the long, hooked nose and thin, cruel mouth.

Looking at that mouth, Bomba remembered the avenue of skulls at the entrance to the valley, the skeleton of the man that had been left to bleach in the sun, the heap of human bones lying one atop the others in that grisly place. Bomba glanced at the tortured mastiff trying feebly to lick its wounds and thought he understood a good deal about Pierre Mendoza, the ruler of the Valley of Skulls.

What mercy could he, Bomba, expect from such a man?

Mendoza was speaking, not to Bomba, but to a slave who stood near by.

"Bring food and drink," said the big boss. "And send some one to bathe and dress the wounds of this brave lad who is not afraid even of Pierre Mendoza!"

Bomba was bewildered by the sudden change. What did the man want of him? What kind of game was this that he was playing?

Every instinct of the jungle boy warned him against the big man with the cruel mouth. Yet Mendoza's attentions were now of the friendliest. He seemed, for some reason that Bomba could not fathom, to wish to placate the jungle boy and win his confidence.

A slave bathed Bomba's wounds, another anointed them with some soothing salve. Food was heaped upon the stone table in the center of

the huge apartment and Bomba was bidden to help himself to whatever he wanted.

Bomba was ravenous, the food delicious. His bonds were loosened, and he sat down with Mendoza and Tom Paul on one of the stone benches that flanked the table.

As he ate Bomba became increasingly drowsy. He found himself answering sleepily, though intelligently enough, the questions with which the two men plied him. As though in a dream he could hear the voice of Mendoza questioning, his own voice answering.

At last he heard nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing. His head slumped over on the table. He lay as if dead!

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ASTONISHING STATEMENT

HOURS later—or so it seemed to Bomba—the jungle boy struggled back to consciousness to find himself still a prisoner.

He lay upon a couch of boughs. His hands and feet were bound, but not so tightly as to be painful. Instead, they seemed to have been adjusted by a clumsy, careless hand—the hand of one who perhaps had drunk too deeply.

Bomba was still very drowsy. The sensation was delightful. Only the peril of his position and his habit of constant alertness prevented the lad from yielding to it and drifting off once more into heavy sleep.

The chamber in which he lay was dark, but at one end of it was a doorway leading into a lighted room. That room was the same, Bomba supposed, in which he had been feasted that night. In fact, he could see the figure of Mendoza himself slumped over on the stone bench, his head on his arms.

What made Bomba's heart beat more quickly

and stirred his senses to full alertness was the sight of a rifle that lay on the bench beside the sleeping Mendoza.

From where Bomba lay he could see only a small portion of the lighted chamber. The room might be full of attendants for all he knew. Still, the chance was worth taking.

The sight of the firearm was like a tonic to Bomba. If he could reach it and steal out of the room without awaking the sleeping Mendoza, he might make good his escape.

Cautiously Bomba tested his bonds.

He strove to work the thongs from his wrists and ankles. It was slow work, for he must be careful not to wake the sleeping Mendoza or alarm any one else who might be in the lighted chamber.

The ordeal held all the elements of a nightmare for Bomba. That haste was essential he knew. At any moment Mendoza might wake or others might enter the room.

At last his hands were free. This accomplished, Bomba reached down and began the struggle with the thongs that bound his ankles.

In the boy's half-drugged condition his fingers seemed all thumbs as he fumbled with the knots, striving to free himself, all the time keeping his eyes on the lighted room where Mendoza still slept, his head on his arms.

He tried to hurry, but the drug that had been put into his food numbed his activities. While his mind was functioning with its usual alertness, his fingers refused to do his will. They felt dead.

At last a thong loosened. Bomba worked at it doggedly. The thong yielded still more, and by pulling and tugging with all his might the lad finally succeeded in freeing both ankles.

He struggled to his feet and was instantly assailed by dizziness. He stood there swaying, willing his mind to clear, until at last the darkness no longer whirled and swirled about him. The room stood still; once more his feet were firmly planted on the floor.

His eyes still on the sleeping Mendoza and the rifle that lay near his hand, Bomba crept forward cautiously. He made no noise, yet it seemed to him that the beating of his heart would betray him.

At the door of the lighted room he paused. The place seemed empty, except for Mendoza and—Ah! now Bomba knew why his wrists had been bound so lightly, why there had been no slaves left in his strange prison to guard him.

There was a snarl at his right hand, and, turning, he found himself face to face with the man's savage guardian, the mastiff that had leaped at Bomba when the latter first set foot over the threshold of the big boss. The brute had been un-

chained to guard his master's drunken slumbers.

If Bomba had betrayed the slightest fear the brute might have sprung at his throat. But Bomba was not afraid. There was relief in his heart that he had only to deal with an animal instead of the wicked master.

The lad had always had a remarkable power over animals. Now he made no motion of retreat or of attack. He stood calmly with his eyes fixed upon those of the brute, steady, compelling.

The great animal crept closer, ears flattened against its head, a deep rumble issuing from its throat. Bomba stood rigid. If the beast crouched to spring, then would be the time to leap aside. Meanwhile he waited.

Slowly the mastiff crept closer until it almost touched the jungle boy. Then it lowered its great head and—licked the lad's foot!

It was the sign of submission. In his exultation Bomba could have laughed aloud. There was grim humor in the situation. The mastiff relied on to guard the prisoner and prevent his escape had shamelessly gone over to the enemy.

Bomba bent down and gently stroked the dog's head. The brute wagged its tail and gave utterance to a low friendly bark.

The noise alarmed Bomba. He had escaped

one danger only to be menaced by one more terrible. If Mendoza should awake—

Even as the thought crossed his mind the man stirred drowsily and lifted his head.

Bomba sprang for the rifle. His fingers closed upon it as Mendoza groped for the barrel.

The big boss sprang to his feet. With incredible swiftness he put his bulk between Bomba and the door. His face was livid with fear and rage.

"Tara, to me!" he cried. "At his throat, Tara! Do you hear?"

But Tara did not move. He flattened his huge body upon the stone floor and growled softly, deep in his throat.

"He will not come to you!" cried the jungle boy exultantly. "He has become my friend. See!" Holding the rifle in one hand, he bent and stroked the mastiff's head.

Into the man's crafty eyes flashed demoniac anger. He flung himself at the boy, reaching for the rifle.

But Bomba was too quick for him. With the swiftness of a jaguar he leaped aside. As Mendoza lunged past, Bomba threw out his foot and tripped him, bringing him heavily to the floor.

With a snarl the mastiff leaped for the fallen man.

"Back!" cried Bomba. "Back, Tara! Leave him alone!"

There was authority in the voice and the dog backed away, but as Mendoza struggled to rise, the rifle in the hands of Bomba took the place of Tara at his throat.

"Lie still!" commanded the lad. "If you move or cry out, the rifle will send a bullet into you."

All his hatred and distrust of the strange white man flamed into Bomba's eyes. Mendoza saw the look and knew himself defeated. He lay back and closed the lids over his crafty eyes. He was doing some quick thinking.

"You are a bad man," said Bomba slowly. "There are many who would be glad if they heard that Mendoza, the ruler of the Valley of Skulls, was dead."

The muzzle of the rifle moved from the throat of the man to a spot directly over his heart. The finger of the jungle boy tightened on the trigger.

Mendoza moved uncomfortably. His black eyes opened and stared straight into those of Bomba.

"Would Bomba kill his own father?" he asked.

CHAPTER XIX

BEWILDERMENT

BOMBA, stunned at Mendoza's revelation, gazed fixedly at the man who had made it.

"You—my father?" he gasped. "No! I will not believe you. It is only a trick to deceive me."

"Yet I have spoken the truth," insisted Mendoza with apparent sincerity. "If you kill me, you will kill the father for whom you have hunted so long. Would you do that, my son?"

Bomba was bewildered. He hated Mendoza. Even at the moment of the man's confession he knew that he would always dislike and distrust him. Was this indeed his father? Had his long search at last come to an end?

"Your name is Mendoza," he said thickly. "Casson said my father's name was Bartow."

"Yes," was the reply, "Bartow is my name. For reasons that I will tell you later, I changed it to Mendoza. Bomba shall know everything."

Bomba stepped a pace backward.

"And Laura?" he asked stammeringly. "What of Laura?"

The Spaniard rose slowly to his feet. He watched the boy intently as he said with every appearance of deep melancholy:

"Laura was my wife—your mother."

The lad looked about him. A strange trembling seized him and his throat ached as it had ached at other times whenever he had thought of Laura, of the woman with the girl's face and the sweet, dark eyes.

"Laura! My mother!" he whispered. "Where is she? Is she—here?"

The man shook his head.

"She died, alas, many years ago," he told the boy.

Sick at heart, Bomba turned away. A bitter end this to his long, weary search, to the hopes and secret yearnings that had spurred him on to almost superhuman effort!

Laura, his mother, was dead! This man with the hard eyes and the cruel mouth was his father!

"Come," said Mendoza. "You do not seem overjoyed to see me, my son."

Bomba turned toward him the face of one accustomed to conceal his emotions.

"After Bomba's long search," he said gravely, "I should be glad to see my father."

Mendoza stared at him for a long moment, as though baffled by the lad's manner. He shrugged,

then, taking a pipe from his pocket, slowly filled and lighted it.

"You need no longer be a prisoner in your father's house, my son," said Mendoza. "You shall be as free as I am, on condition that you do not run away. I can not bear the thought of losing my son just when I have found him."

"If you are indeed my father, then this is the end of my long search," said Bomba sadly. "Why should I run away?"

"The night is far spent, but there are yet some hours till daylight," said Mendoza. "Let my son follow me to the place where he may sleep on something better than a bed of boughs."

The room to which he showed the bewildered jungle boy was as luxurious as the others had been cold and barren. Bomba looked about him wonderingly. Mendoza stood in the background, watching the lad with the keenest attention.

Skins covered the walls of the stone chamber and were thrown in lavish profusion upon the floor. A massive table stood in the center of the room, and on it were several books. Bomba fingered them wonderingly. He would have liked to be able to read those books as Casson could have read them. He might find out then more readily about Bartow and Laura—

He was brought up abruptly. Bartow was here! Laura was dead! A heartsickness flooded

him. He did not want to believe that the black-browed man watching him so intently was his father. He did not want to believe that Laura with the girl's face and the beautiful eyes was dead.

Mendoza moved impatiently and Bomba roused himself from his unhappy brooding. He continued his wandering inspection of the room.

Over near one skin-draped wall was a chest of drawers and above it a mirror.

Bomba was little accustomed to mirrors, except those furnished by streams and pools. He went over to this one and looked at his reflection wonderingly.

He saw a stalwart, lithe figure and a face burned to the color of bronze by the sun.

"It is not strange that some will not believe that Bomba is white," he told himself. "Bomba's skin is as dark as the skin of the bad chief, Nascanora."

In the mirror Bomba met the glance of Mendoza. Mentally he compared his features with those of his alleged father. He could not see the slightest resemblance. But then, perhaps it was his mother whom he resembled. But no, had not both Jojasta and Sobrinini called him Bartow or Bartow's ghost? Perhaps the years had changed this man as they must have changed Casson.

The bed in the room was also covered profusely

with skins. Bomba tried it and found it as soft as down.

Mendoza approached the lad.

"In the morning," he said, "I will send you clothes that will be more fitting for the son of Pierre Mendoza than the ones you wear. Mine will not do, but I think there are others in my possession that will fit like glove to the hand. And now, my son, I will leave you alone for the rest of the night. Adios."

The door closed behind the man and Bomba was left to the confusion of his thoughts.

My son! How often he had yearned to hear those words spoken by his father! How he had imagined that his heart would leap with answering tenderness when he heard them!

He had looked forward to them as to a benediction. From the lips of Pierre Mendoza they were more like a malediction.

Was the fault in himself? Had he grown so hard, so self-contained in his jungle life that he was no longer susceptible of the affection a son should feel toward his father? Was there no responsiveness left in his nature?

He could not be sure. Yet of one thing he was entirely sure, and that was that, having found the house of his father, there was nothing on earth that could give him greater happiness than to leave it forever.

For a long time he sat on the edge of the most luxurious bed he had ever known, staring at the door through which Mendoza had disappeared.

He crossed the room silently, listened for a moment at the door, and then quickly jerked it open.

There was no one in the long corridor outside. He had half expected that a guard would have been set over him. Was it possible that he was free to leave the house if he wished?

Then he remembered his words to Mendoza. Why should he run away from his father? It was an implied promise.

There was only one light that he could see in the darkness of his heartache and disappointment. If Pirah and the other captives were in the valley, he, Bomba, might be able to help them. Whereas Pierre Mendoza could not be expected to heed the words of Bomba, the jungle boy, he might listen to the pleading of his son.

With this thought to comfort him he at last fell asleep.

The next day brought surprising revelations to Bomba. Not only did Mendoza keep his promise to give him the freedom of the house and the valley, but he appeared eager in every way to please and placate his new-found son.

Yet Bomba could not find in his heart the slightest feeling of affection for his father. He blamed

himself for what he felt to be his own hardness. He told himself that he ought to feel as a son is supposed to feel toward his father, as he had often pictured himself as feeling when he should at last have solved the secret of his parentage. But in his heart dwelt only dislike and distrust.

He asked questions about his mother, but got little satisfaction. Mendoza told him what he knew already, what the diary of Japazy had told up to the place of the missing pages. But when Bomba wanted to go beyond that, Mendoza would either evade the question or would pretend to be so deeply overcome with emotion that he could not bear to talk about it.

As to the wealth of the Spaniard, there was no question. His dwelling was a treasure house of beautiful things, rare rugs and tapestries, queer images in gold and silver silks and precious gems.

Never having had need of it, Bomba did not know the value of wealth. It did not even occur to him at the time to wonder how Mendoza had come to amass such riches.

One of Bomba's first questions to his father was concerning Pirah and those who had been captured with her. Mendoza looked blank.

"I know nothing about them," he said. "If the Araks have captured them, they have probably killed them long before this. I am too busy to be

bothered with skirmishes between the Indians."

Yet, glib as the denial was, some suspicion, some insight into character, told Bomba that the man was not speaking the truth. He resolved to search for himself.

No restraint was placed upon his actions. He was left entirely free to go about in the rubber plantation. What he saw there made his blood boil with anger. For the slaves were treated with the most inhuman cruelty. They were overworked, laboring from dawn till far into the night. Their food was of the worst quality and miserably insufficient. They were lashed at the slightest whim of the brutal overseer, Tom Paul, for whom, as the lad came to know him better, he conceived a deadly hatred. Many of the slaves were mere skeletons and their ribs showed under the tight covering of skin.

Wherever Bomba could, he made inquiries of the wretched creatures as to whether they had seen anything of Pirah and her fellow captives. But none of them knew, or if they did, they were afraid to tell.

Bomba spoke of the cruelties he had witnessed to Mendoza, but the big boss simply shrugged his shoulders.

"These men are slaves," he said callously. "What would you have? They must be beaten or they will not work."

This response deepened the loathing that Bomba had for the man who called himself his father.

Most of the slaves, Bomba conjectured, consisted of captives that the Araks made in their raids. Bomba knew little of government, but Casson had told him that the laws of Brazil forbade the holding of slaves.

Did this explain why the big boss had secreted himself in this remote valley, why he kept the Araks in his pay to guard the place against intruders, why he had erected the avenue of skulls to strike fear into the hearts of any prowlers, why he had spread or caused to be spread the terrible legends about the monsters and demons that inhabited the region? Thus secreted, he could amass a fortune in rubber and by the aid of confederates smuggle the product through to the coast and thence to the markets of the world.

Bomba was pondering these things as he made his way along a narrow trail when he was startled by a sudden, sharp cry of agony.

"Have mercy! By the gods of the jungle have mercy! Spare me!"

CHAPTER XX

TORTURE

ANOTHER cry, horrible in the tale it told of mortal torment, sent Bomba leaping toward the clearing from which the cry had come. What he saw caused the hair to rise at the nape of his neck. His hands clenched in a gesture of rage.

Two figures were there, not twenty feet from him. One he recognized instantly as that of Tom Paul. The other was that of a slave.

The half-breed had thrown his victim upon the ground and was horribly engaged in opening half-closed wounds on the man's back with a knife.

Red swam before the eyes of Bomba. He leaped upon Tom Paul, bearing him to the ground above the writhing body of the slave. The knife with which the brute had tortured his victim flew from his hand. Instantly the brown hand of Bomba grasped it.

He jabbed the half-breed with the point of his knife. Tom Paul howled with rage and fear.

"It is not so good when Tom Paul feels it!" exclaimed Bomba.

The half-breed struggled desperately, but Bomba was the stronger of the two. The lad leaped to his feet, grabbed the rawhide whip that the overseer had laid aside and gave the latter several vigorous strokes that raised welts on his skin.

The half-breed staggered to his feet livid with rage as Bomba threw the whip aside.

"The big boss shall hear of this!" he hissed. "He will kill you for it."

"Go to my father and tell him that Bomba sends you to him and why," returned the lad.

His face black with hate, the overseer stumbled away through the trees.

"Master!" came a voice that Bomba knew. "You have come!"

Bomba looked down and saw the face of Gibo!

He seized him joyously and dragged him to his feet.

"Quick, Gibo!" he cried. "Tom Paul may come back and Bomba must have speech with Gibo alone."

The faithful Indian was so weak that he could scarcely walk. His flesh was drawn taut over his bones. His eyes were bright with fever.

Bomba wound the man's arms about his neck and carried him in his stout young arms for some distance into the brush.

"Poor Gibo has fared ill," he said compassion-

ately. "Has he been long a prisoner in the Valley of Skulls?"

"For many days," returned the native wearily. "We are worse than prisoners here. We are slaves and our master is a demon."

"And the others?" asked Bomba eagerly.

"Ashati and Neram were wounded by the spears of the Araks," Gibo answered. "It would have been better for them if the sharp steel had entered their hearts. They are very sick."

"And still they are forced to work among the rubber trees?" asked Bomba.

"They will work till they die," was the answer, "and when the flesh shall have been picked from their bones by birds and beasts there will be two more heads on poles in the Valley of Skulls."

"And little Pirah!" pursued Bomba. "Where is she?"

Gibo shook his head doubtfully.

"Since the day of our capture we have not seen Pirah," he answered. "Neram thinks that she is held captive in the house of the big boss."

Bomba nodded thoughtfully.

"Mendoza may hold her prisoner, thinking that Hondura is planning an attack upon the valley," he muttered. "He may be holding the little Pirah as a hostage."

He knew that there was a wing of the dwelling

set apart for the women attendants that all others were forbidden to approach.

Gibo had been regarding Bomba anxiously. Now he leaned forward and touched the lad upon the knee.

"All is well, now that Bomba has come," he ventured. "Bomba will lead us in safety out of this fearful Valley of Skulls?"

"Bomba will help Gibo and Ashati and Neram," the boy promised solemnly. "If Pirah is a prisoner in the house of Mendoza, Bomba will find her. But Bomba and Gibo must not be seen together. Hasten now and return to the rubber trees. Bomba will think and have further talk with Gibo."

They parted and Bomba made his way by a circuitous route toward the house. Father or no father, he was resolved to have a plain talk with Mendoza. He would urge freedom for little Pirah and her three fellow captives. He would try persuasion first. The man had seemed willing, indeed eager, to please him in most things, thought Bomba. Perhaps he would please him in this.

But Mendoza was away and did not return till evening. When Bomba knew that he had returned he made his way toward the man's apartment.

As he neared it he paused, hearing the sound

of voices. The tones of the half-breed rose fretfully above the booming of the big boss. The latter had been drinking, as was evident by the thickness of his accents.

"You should kill the lad and be done with it," Tom Paul snarled.

"What, kill my own son, my dear son?" exclaimed Mendoza with a mocking laugh. "Not yet, Tom Paul! Not yet! I'm getting too much pleasure in playing with the young fool. Some day, perhaps, when I get tired of his infernal questioning about his mother. His mother! Ha, ha! His mother that I have never seen!"

He stopped, evidently to replenish his glass, judging by the gurgling sound that followed.

"I give you full credit, Tom Paul, for wheedling out of him the story of his life," went on Mendoza. "But it's hard sometimes for me to remember the details as you gave them to me. Some day, perhaps, I may make a slip and then the fat will be in the fire. On that day I may have to kill him."

"Beware lest on that day he kill you," said the half-breed. "The boy is more dangerous than a jaguar. He does not know what fear is. Did I not see him fight the anaconda? You are a strong man, Pierre Mendoza; but in a combat that boy would be your master. I am a strong man, I, Tom Paul, but he handled me to-day as though I

were a child. It was an evil day when I brought him to this place. I do not yet understand why you go through this farce of pretending that you are his father."

Bomba stood rooted to the spot, stunned by the revelations of the plotters. His heart filled with rage as the scoundrelism of the pair who had traded on his most sacred emotions burst upon him.

He felt for his knife. He had left it in his room. Two men would have suddenly departed this life if he had had it with him. He was tempted to return for it, but he did not wish to miss a word of the conversation. So he mastered himself and waited.

"There were several reasons why I have done this," Mendoza explained. "What you told me of the boy's courage made me curious to see him. I could use a boy like that to lead my warriors and keep strangers away from the valley. I could use him to subdue the slaves in the event of an insurrection. I thought I might mold him to my will, make him as hard and pitiless as I am myself. I thought if I pretended to be his father, he would the more readily obey me.

"Then, too, it is possible that his real parents, if they are still living, are rich and powerful. I have means of tracing those things that the ignorant jungle boy has not. If it be as I have said,

there might be much profit to be wrung from them in return for the knowledge I have of the lad's whereabouts. There are many things that Pierre Mendoza thinks about that do not enter the mind of Tom Paul."

He chuckled drunkenly, and again Bomba heard the gurgling of wine in the glass.

The half-breed grunted impatiently.

"Pierre Mendoza speaks of subduing an insurrection of the slaves," he said. "The boy is more likely to cause an uprising of the slaves. You have heard of what he did to-day when I was pricking one of the lazy dogs."

"He will get over that," declared Mendoza. "I will train him. And if he defies my will, my knife will seek his throat and he will trouble us no more. But now I am weary and would sleep."

The half-breed rose at this dismissal and Bomba swiftly retreated to his room. His hands were clenched, his eyes blazing.

"An uprising of the slaves!" The words of Tom Paul recurred to him.

"That uprising," Bomba promised himself fiercely, "is closer at hand than Pierre Mendoza dreams!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE MUTTERING OF THE STORM

THERE was little sleep for Bomba that night as he tossed restlessly on his bed, his heart in a wild tumult of emotions.

At first it was rage that stirred him most deeply, rage at the trick that had been played on him by Tom Paul and later taken advantage of by the half-breed's master.

He writhed as he recalled the scene in the hut when, thinking he had found a friend in the man, he had unburdened his sore heart to him. Little had he known at the time that the half-breed was committing every word of those revelations to memory. He could imagine the concealed chuckles of the rascal at the way he was beguiling the jungle boy.

Now the mystery of why Mendoza had evaded so many of Bomba's questions regarding his mother was explained. He had known only what Bomba already knew himself.

Into Bomba's mind came the strange prophecy of Sobrinini that had seemed so contradictory at

the time, that he should find his father and yet should not find his father. Here was the answer. He had found his father—as he supposed. He had not found his father—only this vile pretender to that sacred relationship.

The lad's anger was succeeded by a feeling of profound relief that, after all, Mendoza was not his father. Now there need no longer be a struggle within him between what he felt and what he told himself he ought to feel. From now on it would be war to the knife between him and Mendoza.

And little Pirah! Mendoza had said that he knew nothing about her. Gibo had said that she was believed to be in the apartments of the women of the household. That was probably true. She would be a valuable hostage, if Hondura and his men should invade the Valley of Skulls.

So his work lay clear before him. To rescue Pirah, Gibo, Ashati and Neram, and in addition to that as many others as possible of the wretched slaves whose atrocious treatment on the plantation had made the boy's heart bleed. His spirits rose as he faced the task before him.

That task would be tremendous. He did not blind himself to the difficulties that lay in the way. Most of the fighting and all of the planning he would have to do himself. His followers were so weakened and wasted from cruel treatment that

they could not be counted on, if it came to a combat with the ferocious warriors of the Araks.

What he could not do by force he would have to do by craft. That craft had never failed him yet. He vowed to himself that it should not fail him now.

But above all he must take care not to awaken the suspicions of Mendoza and Tom Paul. If they should gain the slightest inkling of his plans, they would be blocked instantly, and his own life would not be worth a moment's purchase.

So, although it galled him, it was with a pleasant face that he greeted his counterfeit father when they sat down to breakfast on the following morning.

Mendoza himself was in a friendly mood to all appearances, and it was hard to realize that he was the same man who had spoken so casually the night before about driving a knife into the boy's throat.

They talked of indifferent matters until Mendoza remarked:

"Tom Paul was telling me that you and he had a disagreement yesterday."

"Yes," returned Bomba lightly. "I thought he was being a little too rough with one of the slaves and I lost my temper."

"Natural enough in one of your age," said Mendoza pleasantly. "Young blood is hot blood.

I used to feel that way myself until I learned a little more of life. But I have learned to control it."

Bomba thought of the man's demoniac passion when he was lashing the mastiff, but said nothing.

"Still," went on Mendoza, as he crossed his legs and lighted his pipe, "Tom Paul is a valuable overseer, and it is well that we should keep on the right side of him. By the way, I noticed that you used the word 'slave.' We have no slaves on this plantation."

His eyes bored Bomba through and through as he made this atrociously false declaration, but the boy's face remained impassible.

"No," said Mendoza, "the people here are well paid and well fed." Again Bomba had hard work to control his features. "But they are a lazy and ungrateful lot, and if they were left to themselves, would let the plantation fall into ruin. So we have to maintain strict discipline. It is possible that Tom Paul is a little too severe at times, and whenever any such case comes to my attention I will reprove him. But if I were you, I would not interfere with him again."

"Very well," assented Bomba.

"I am very fond of you," went on the hypocritical scoundrel, "and I have great plans for you in the future. As you can see from the way this house is furnished, I have made a great deal of

money. And I shall make a great deal more, for there is a fortune in rubber and the demand for it is increasing all over the world. But I am not as young as I once was, and I want you, my son, to take some of the burden off your father's shoulders. I want you to learn all about the rubber business and how to run the plantation. But in order to do that successfully, you must not let these workmen impose upon your goodness of heart. They will cheat you whenever they can and neglect their work unless you are severe with them. Workmen are alway complaining. I am easy-going and tender-hearted myself, but I have had to learn to suppress those feelings. My son must do the same."

So this was the first lesson, Bomba thought, in the hardening process that Mendoza had referred to the night before, the attempt to make the boy as brutal and cruel as himself.

"Bomba has heard his father's"—the word almost gagged him—"words," said the lad submissively. "He will think over them and remember them."

"That is well," replied Mendoza, gratified beyond measure at the apparent proof that he had found so docile a pupil. "I will tell Tom Paul that I have had this talk with you and that from this time on you will not interfere with his discipline of the workmen on the plantation."

He rubbed his hands in satisfaction as he rose and left the room. The poison, he thought, was working.

When Bomba met Tom Paul that day in a remote part of the plantation the half-breed scowled at him, but the lad acted as though nothing had happened. Bomba asked several questions about the gathering of the rubber sap, and Tom Paul conjectured that the big boss had given the boy the lecture on his future behavior that he had promised.

In the course of that same day, Bomba, watching his chance when the half-breed had been called to some other part of the estate, sought out Ashati and Neram. They were overjoyed when they recognized him, but a gesture from the lad warned them against anything that would attract attention. Gradually he edged himself over to a thick clump of trees where he would be sheltered from observation, motioning to the two Indians to follow him.

Then, in hurried words, for time was precious, he acquainted them with his intention of escaping, taking them and Pirah with him and as many of the slaves as wanted to accept this chance for freedom.

As Gibo had said, the faithful fellows were in as deplorable a condition as Gibo himself, but the prospect of release from the demon who held

them in thrall thrilled them with hope and gave them a new hold on life.

"But Ashati and Neram have no spears or bows and arrows with which to fight," said Ashati.

"Bomba will attend to that," answered the lad. "He knows of a building near the house where many weapons are stored for the use of the warriors, if they should be needed. When the time comes he will see that those who follow him shall have what spears and bows they need."

"It is well, Master," said Neram. "It will be good to feel them in the hand once more."

"Let Ashati and Neram pass the word to whatever other slaves they can trust," directed Bomba. "Do not speak Bomba's name, but tell them to be ready when the sign is given. Tell Bomba one thing. Do Ashati and Neram know anything of little Pirah?"

"Yes, Master," Neram answered promptly. "Neram knows."

Bomba's heart leaped.

"What does Neram know?" asked the lad eagerly. "Speak quickly!"

"Neram has seen Pirah twice," responded the native. "He has seen her at a window in the house of the big boss. She was pulled back quickly out of sight, but not before the eyes of Neram had told him they had seen the daughter of Hondura."

In answer to the jungle boy's questions, Neram described exactly the window in question. It was in a remote section of the big house on the second story. Bomba knew that a thick growth of vines ran all along that side of the house. To one of his strength and agility it would be an easy task to reach it from the ground.

"Neram has taken a heavy weight from Bomba's heart by the good words he has spoken," said the lad. "He would not leave the Valley of Skulls unless he took little Pirah with him. But now we will not talk more words, lest Tom Paul return and find us. Let Ashati and Neram be ready when Bomba shall speak the word."

He hurried off and the two Indians slipped back to their work, fortunately without attracting the notice of the brutal overseer.

CHAPTER XXII

A DARING VENTURE

BOMBA was jubilant as he made his way back to the big house. What had promised to be one of the most perplexing of his problems had been practically solved by Neram's statement.

He took special note of the window that Neram had pointed out. Secreted in thick shrubbery, he kept close watch to see if perchance the little girl would not appear. But though he waited long his vigil was in vain.

Taking advantage of the freedom with which he was permitted to wander where he chose, Bomba made a long trip to the entrance to the Valley of Skulls. Once more the sight of those grisly relics of the slaves that had been worked to death on the plantation filled him with rage and strengthened his determination to wreak vengeance on the demon who had been the author of so much misery.

What form that vengeance would take he had not yet determined on. The first thing to do was to free the slaves and put them and himself be-

yond the power of Mendoza. After that it would be time enough to make some plan to bring that arch-criminal to justice.

But he dismissed that for the moment from his thoughts. The special object of his trip was to estimate the strength of the Araks through whom he might have to fight his way in the coming break for freedom.

He was surprised to see how few men of fighting age were to be seen in the village. With few exceptions, the only ones moving among the huts were women and children and tottering old men too aged to hunt or fight.

Curious to find an explanation of this unusual state of affairs, he made his way with all the stealth of an Indian to the thick brush that was within earshot of the spring to which the women of the village came for water.

Burrowed deep in the leaves where one would have to stumble over him to discover his presence, he listened to the gossiping chatter of the women and girls. And from this he learned something that filled him with exultation.

It developed that the men of the tribe had gone off in two large bodies; one for a warlike raid on a group of villages at a long distance, from which they were not expected to return for at least two weeks; the other on an extensive hunt for game.

Nothing could have happened more oppor-

tunely for Bomba's plans. It disposed of the chief obstacle to success, the fierce warriors who ordinarily could have been depended on to prevent his exit from the valley. Now was his time to strike.

With the utmost caution he withdrew from his hiding place and hurried back to the plantation of Mendoza.

As he had told Ashati and Neram, there was an outbuilding a little way off from the big house in which the surplus weapons of Mendoza were stored. He had already had a glimpse of these at a time when the door had been inadvertently left open. There were plenty of them, spears, bows and arrows, quite enough to equip the motley array that he expected to follow him.

Ordinarily the door was locked and the key was carried in the overseer's pocket. But the building was old, the door of wood and rather dilapidated, and Bomba knew that it would be an easy matter to break in when the time came.

The weather up to this time had been extraordinarily fine, too fine, in fact, to last much longer. In the natural course of things a storm would soon come, and Bomba was glad on awaking the morning after his trip to the village of the Araks to see that the sky was overclouded and that a tempest was brewing. Yet the indications

were that it would hold off till that afternoon or evening.

That morning, watching closely the movements of Tom Paul, Bomba managed a brief interview with Gibo. The latter had already learned of the lad's previous talk with Ashati and Neram and was worked up to a high pitch of excitement.

"Listen, Gibo," said Bomba. "A storm is coming. It is the thing for which Bomba has wished. When the weather is good our trail may be followed. But the rain will wash away our foot-prints and the enemy will be confused in mind."

"The Master speaks wise words," said Gibo.

"It will rain to-night," went on Bomba, looking at the sky which, to his trained senses, confirmed his conviction. "The storm will cause all to seek shelter, Mendoza and Tom Paul with the rest. The guards themselves will think of nothing but refuge from the wind and rain. Then will be the time for Bomba to strike."

The eyes of Gibo brightened at the prospect.

"Have the slaves been told of Bomba's plan?" asked the jungle boy.

"Yes, Master," replied Gibo; "and their hands clenched and their backs straightened and their eyes blazed and they murmured prayers to their gods for help."

"Good!" said Bomba. "Let Gibo, then, and Ashati and Neram spread the word that it is to-

night they must be ready to follow Bomba. Tell them to creep up and be near the place where the spears and bows and arrows are kept and wait for Bomba's word."

"It shall be as the master says," promised Gibo. "There is but one thing that Gibo would ask of Bomba."

"Let Gibo speak," said the lad.

"It is that when once more the spear is in Gibo's hand he may seek out the big boss and plunge it into his heart," said Gibo.

His eyes flamed and his wasted frame shook with passion.

"No, Gibo," said Bomba, in response to the Indian's fervent appeal, "it may not be. Bomba will not kill any man in cold blood, nor will he let Gibo kill. If Mendoza is to be sent to the place of the dead, it shall be in fair fight. Beseech me no more, for Bomba has spoken."

The native bowed his head in submission and Bomba slipped away through the trees until he had reached a distant part of the plantation.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN FLIGHT

THE day wore slowly away with the rain still holding off, and it was only at dusk that the storm finally broke. Then it came in a burst of fury that sent every living thing scurrying for shelter.

The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, and the rain came down in torrents as though all the windows of heaven had been opened. But the harder the tempest raged the more jubilant grew the heart of the jungle boy. He saw in it a presage of success.

Yet, through the evening meal, at which Tom Paul was present, Bomba gave no hint of the tumult that was raging in his soul.

Bomba noted that both Mendoza and Tom Paul were drinking heavily. Their faces grew more flushed, their voices thicker. It looked as though they were in for a night of debauchery, and Bomba conjectured that in a few hours they would be sunk in drunken slumber.

He slipped quietly away from the table and repaired to his room. There he stripped himself

of the clothes that he had worn at the bidding of Mendoza and resumed his jungle attire of sandals, tunic, and puma skin. He hated the very touch of anything that had come from the hands of the cruel monster.

He had previously assembled in his room the old familiar weapons with which he had so often faced savage beasts and equally savage men, his trusty machete, his unerring bow and arrows, and the rifle that had been given to him some months before by white men.

He waited awhile until he thought that the liquor with which the men were plying themselves had done its work. Then he stole out again into the corridor and approached the door of Mendoza's apartment.

Cautiously he glanced in. Tom Paul had already succumbed and had slumped back into his chair in a drunken stupor. Mendoza was chuckling tipsily to himself and drinking long drafts from a bottle because he could not pour the spirits steadily into the glass. It would not be long before he would be dead to the world.

As stealthily as a panther, Bomba crept down the stairs and out into the night. He made his way to the storehouse.

From various hiding places near by came a host of shadowy figures and entered the storehouse. There Bomba hastily distributed the

weapons, which were grasped eagerly by the men who were actuated by two strong emotions, hatred of their cruel master and a frantic desire for freedom.

In whispers Bomba commanded them to drift away in the darkness and assemble at a chosen spot where the brush grew thickest a few hundred yards from the house. Gibo was to be in charge and they were to obey whatever orders he might give till Bomba himself should rejoin them.

This done, Bomba took a small coil of rope and repaired to a spot directly under the window of little Pirah's room. There was a light in the room that seemed to come from the feeble flickering of a candle.

A tangle of vines ran up from the ground and, using these as a rope, Bomba was soon on a level with the window. He lifted his head cautiously above the sill and looked in.

Pirah had not yet gone to bed. The little girl sat in a chair with an expression of deep sadness on her face. She was gazing absently into space.

Very silently, Bomba raised the window.

"Pirah!" breathed the jungle boy, scarcely above a whisper.

The girl started and looked bewilderedly around. She seemed to have the impulse to scream, but she was a chieftain's daughter with the inbred self-control of her race.

"Pirah!" came the voice again. "Do not be afraid. It is Bomba. Do not make a noise."

The little girl hurried to the window and threw her arms about the lad's neck, hugging him convulsively.

"Oh, Bomba!" she breathed softly. "Pirah is so glad that Bomba has come!"

Bomba gently unclasped the child's arms and stepped over the sill into the room.

"Listen, Pirah," he whispered. "Bomba has come to take Pirah back to the good Hondura, her father. We must make no noise or the evil people will hear us. Pirah must be brave and do just what Bomba says."

He snatched up a coat to throw about the child's head and shoulders. As he did so, the door of the room began to open.

Like a flash Bomba slipped behind the door as a native woman entered, a big, strongly built squaw.

The newcomer looked in surprise at the open window, then at the coat that the little girl had on. Suspicion darted into her eyes and she opened her mouth to give the alarm. But before a sound came, Bomba had thrown one arm about her from the back, pinioning her own, while he clapped the other hand firmly over her mouth. She struggled for a moment, but in vain.

"Listen!" warned Bomba. "The squaw shall not be hurt if she does not scream. But if she

wants to live she must be quiet. Does the squaw understand?"

The woman nodded, her eyes wide with terror.

"It is well," said Bomba. "Now Bomba is going to tie the squaw fast to the bed and put something in her mouth to keep her from calling. But he will not hurt her and all she will have to do is to lie here till some one comes."

He took from his belt the rope that he had brought from the storehouse in anticipation of what had happened and securely tied the squaw to the bed. Then he adjusted a gag, taking care that she should be able to breathe comfortably.

He turned to Pirah.

"Come!" he said. "We must hasten. Let Pirah put her arms about Bomba's neck and let her not be afraid."

"Pirah is not afraid as long as she is with Bomba," was the reply.

Bomba blew out the light and let himself out of the window, holding the child securely, while with his free hand he grasped the ladder of vines.

CHAPTER XXIV

PURSUED

IN a moment Bomba reached the ground. Bending his head against the storm and wrapping Pirah's coat close about her, the lad hurried off to the trysting place.

He cast a glance behind him at the abode of evil that he hoped he was leaving for the last time. The light still burned brightly in the room where Mendoza and Tom Paul were deep in their potations. The rest of the house was in darkness, save where here and there a feeble light flickered in the quarters of the household slaves.

The rain was still coming down in torrents and the thunder and lightning were almost continuous. It was the lightning that Bomba feared more than anything else, lest some sudden flare should reveal the fugitives to some of the guards of the plantations.

But the guards were sticking tight to shelter. They knew that their tyrant and the brutal overseer had set in for a night of drinking, and they had no fear that their laxity would be discovered.

In the deep shadows Bomba found his followers under the command of Gibo, ready for instant flight like hounds waiting to be slipped from the leash.

It was out of the question to place Pirah on the ground and let her run along with the rest. It would tax the little feet too cruelly and her strength would soon give out. Besides, to accommodate the pace of the rest of the party to hers would retard their progress seriously, perhaps fatally.

She was only a feather's weight to Bomba, and he could have carried her along easily. But as the leader of the party his arms as well as his mind had to be free, so as to be ready for any emergency.

He selected half a dozen of the strongest men and committed Pirah to their care. They were to take turns in carrying the little maiden.

"Now we go on," said Bomba to his men. "Let all remember that we are fighting not only for our liberty but for life. For if we yield to Mendoza if he should follow us, he will torture and kill us and place our skulls on poles as he has done to others. It is better to die fighting than to perish under the lash of Mendoza."

A murmur of fierce determination ran through the group as Bomba started in the van with Gibo,

Ashati and Neram, his trusted henchmen close behind him.

They soon left the plantation and plunged into the jungle that lay between the domain of Mendoza and the tribal home of the Araks.

Now the lightning proved friendly, for the frequent flashes illumined the woods and showed the fugitives where they were going. It was well that Bomba had carefully noted the dangers of the way when he had been brought captive to the plantation and when later he had made his scouting expedition to the vicinity of the village spring. That knowledge now stood him in good stead, and he led his followers as safely and almost as swiftly as he would have done in broad daylight.

From time to time he halted to listen for sounds of pursuit. But he heard nothing, and with every mile he traversed his hopes of ultimate escape rose higher.

If the fact of his flight were not discovered before morning, he would have had at least eight hours' advantage over his enemies.

To be sure, there was the chance that the woman who had been bound fast to the bed in Pirah's room might be discovered by some other of the household. Or Tom Paul, rousing perhaps at midnight and staggering to his quarters, might discover something to rouse his suspicions and clear the fumes of liquor from his besotted brain.

Or some one might chance upon the broken door of the storehouse and know at once what had happened.

But these were chances that had to be taken. Bomba dismissed them from his mind and bent all his thoughts to what lay before him.

They reached the horrible avenue of the skulls, and the men who were carrying Pirah, at Bomba's command, drew the coat tight over the little girl's head to protect her from the grisly sight.

At length they reached the outskirts of the village of the Araks. It was midnight now and the place was wrapped in slumber. Hardly a light was to be seen in any of the huts.

It seemed as though it would be almost safe to glide through the village itself. But there was always the chance that some of the numerous dogs might bark and rouse the people. So, though time was precious, Bomba made a wide circuit until he had come out on the broad plateau that lay beyond the town.

Now for the first time Bomba permitted himself to draw a long breath. The chief perils of their flight had been surmounted. They had won free from the plantation of Mendoza, had passed the village of the ferocious tribe that guarded the valley. The way lay straight before them to the maloca of Hondura.

To Bomba himself, with his tremendous

strength and stores of vitality, the journey thus far had been as nothing. But to his sickly and emaciated followers it had proved terribly exhausting. Some of them seemed almost at their last gasp.

Rest was imperative, unless he was willing to leave some of them behind. And that the jungle boy would not do, even if his own life should pay the forfeit. They had trusted him. He would not fail them.

So, desperate as was the need of haste, Bomba halted for a full hour. At the end of that time Bomba again gave the signal to advance, and they kept on, though at slightly lesser speed, until the first streaks of dawn crept up the eastern sky.

Then at last they made camp. The rain had ceased and the coming day promised to be clear. Bomba's weary followers threw themselves down on the ground. Most of them fell asleep at once, but Bomba sent Gibo, Ashati and Neram on a hunt for turtles' eggs. He had stuffed his pouch with cured meat before he had left the plantation, and this was enough with the eggs to provide a meager breakfast for all. Later on, when they should have passed the danger zone, he would have no trouble in securing plenty of game.

He himself felt no need of sleep. His mind was at too high a tension to dream of slumber. His ears were constantly straining for sounds of pursuit.

"Gibo," he said to his faithful follower, when the latter had returned with a plentiful supply of eggs, "it is in Bomba's mind to go back a little way on the trail while the men are sleeping. Bomba leaves Gibo in charge of the camp. He knows that Gibo will be as watchful as the jaguar. Bomba will not be gone long."

He slipped away like a shadow and was soon lost to sight in the jungle.

For nearly an hour he pursued his way, all his senses on the alert. Then, reaching a great tree that towered high above its fellows, he climbed it till he reached the top, from which he could see for miles in the direction of the Arak village.

What he saw made his pulses quicken.

Not more than two miles distant, pressing on the trail of the fugitives, was a strong body of savages, led by Mendoza and the villainous half-breed, Tom Paul!

CHAPTER XXV

VICTORY

ONE other figure Bomba recognized in that warlike array of pursuers—the gigantic form of Molamba at the head of his braves.

This was the most disturbing fact of all. Bomba had figured that Mendoza, if he started in pursuit, would not be able to rally more followers than the dozen or twenty guards who were regularly on duty at the plantation. In addition, he might pick up a few of the older Araks who had been left in the village with the Arak women. Against this force Bomba would have had a good chance of victory, even with his emaciated and sickly followers.

But the lad had relied on the absence of Molamba and most of his braves on their raiding expedition. Yet, here they were, perhaps sixty or more, vigorous, hardy, ferocious, filled with the lust of battle and slaughter.

Against that formidable array of double their number what chance would there be that Bomba's motley troop could make a successful stand? They

might die fighting, but they would die, nevertheless, or be dragged back to unimaginable horrors. And little Pirah!

Swiftly the jungle boy slid down from the tree and began running. But he ran, not toward his own camp but toward his enemies!

Had he gone mad? Was he bent on suicide? Far from that!

He pressed rapidly on until he reached the edge of a broad plateau that Mendoza and his followers would have to cross.

There he waited.

In a few minutes the vanguard of his enemies appeared in sight, perhaps five hundred yards away.

They halted in amazement as they saw the figure of the lad calmly facing them across the broad expanse. Then, as they recognized him, a yell of savage triumph went up from four score throats and they rushed forward at redoubled speed, shouting and brandishing their spears.

Mendoza and Tom Paul sent shots from their rifles. Bomba dropped to the ground and the bullets whistled over his head.

Then he leaped to his feet, brandished his own rifle in defiance and darted off into the jungle almost at right angles to the trail which led to his camp. Immediately his pursuers changed their

course and were after him in full cry like hounds after a fox.

Bomba knew that, barring accidents, he could keep up the race for hours. He knew that none of his pursuers was as fleet of foot as himself, that none was as cunning as himself in doubling and twisting, that none was so versed in jungle lore.

He could easily have outdistanced them. But he did not want to do that, at least, not for the present. He wanted to keep just near enough to lure them on, hoping that at any moment the fugitive might come within their grasp. The farther they pursued him the farther they would be from Bomba's troop.

But this was only part of the boy's plan. He knew how dependent savages were on their leader in jungle warfare. The death of their chief threw them into confusion, struck them with panic. Instead of a regiment they became a demoralized mob.

In this case there were three prominent figures in the enemy's ranks that would have to be accounted for, Mendoza, Tom Paul and Molamba. If one of these were killed, the others might carry on. If two were killed or disabled, the third could still assume the leadership. But if all three were put out of action, the savages would see in

it the disapproval of their gods and give up the enterprise.

Bomba's lips straightened into a grim line. He watched and waited for his chance.

It came a little later when Tom Paul, in the ardor of his pursuit, broke into a little clearing. On the further side of that clearing Bomba had halted.

The half-breed caught sight of the lad, and with a savage shout raised his gun. But he was a second too late. Bomba's rifle spoke first and the half-breed dropped with a bullet in his leg. Bomba had purposely aimed low, as he wished to disable rather than to kill.

There was a hubbub of consternation as the others gathered about the wounded man. Mendoza was fairly foaming at the mouth with rage. He gave orders to four stalwart braves to bear the wounded man along with them and again plunged on in pursuit.

Now they were in a region where morasses abounded, and Bomba had to exercise the greatest caution. This slowed him up somewhat, and an exultant shout burst from Mendoza's throat as he gained upon the lad.

But that shout ended in a yell of alarm as the Spaniard, with his eyes fixed on Bomba to the exclusion of everything else, missed his footing on

the narrow trail and plunged heavily into a deep quagmire.

His bulk and weight sank him almost immediately up to his waist, and his struggles to reach solid ground only bore him in more deeply.

He roared a command to Molamba and his warriors to help him out. There was an instinctive movement on the part of the braves to rush to his relief. But to their astonishment and that of Mendoza, Molamba stayed them with a gesture of his hand.

"Wait!" he commanded. "Molamba would think."

They slunk back obediently.

Mendoza glared at Molamba furiously.

"Think!" he shouted. "What do you mean, dog? What is there to think about? Pull me out of this infernal bog. Quickly, too, or it will be the worse for you."

A wicked grin began to form on Molamba's face. For the first time in years he had a chance to even accounts with Mendoza, to repay the truculent tyrant for the insults and epithets that had been showered freely upon him and had shamed him in the eyes of his tribe. His enemy had been delivered into his hand.

Then, too, there was the immense loot to be gained from the treasure house of the big boss when the owner was no longer there.

"Dog!" he repeated. "Did Mendoza call Molamba dog? So be it. But the dog is alive and Mendoza will soon be dead."

The fear of death came into Mendoza's eyes. Those awful words spelled his doom. He frothed at the mouth. He raved and cried out. Then he changed his tone and begged and wheedled. Molamba simply laughed.

The chief turned to the men who were bearing Tom Paul.

"It were well that he died with his master," he said. "Throw him in."

Despite the frantic screams of the villainous half-breed, he was thrown far out into the quagmire.

Shrieks rent the air. The desperate struggles of the doomed scoundrels only made them sink the deeper. Molamba and his braves calmly squatted down on the edge of the bog and watched their enemies die.

Bomba, at a distance, heard the screams of Mendoza and Tom Paul and the gloating laughter of Molamba and his warriors. He could not see clearly, but he conjectured what had happened. He turned at once off his course and struck out directly for his own camp.

His fear of any further pursuit was almost gone. The quarrel with him and the other fugitives had been Mendoza's, not Molamba's. The

latter and his braves had simply been tools in the Spaniard's hands. Now that the latter was dead, there would be no further reason for Molamba and his men to keep up the chase. Their first instinct would be to return to the plantation and revel in the rich loot of the tyrant's mansion.

In a little while Bomba reached the camp, to be received with rejoicing by his followers, who had been seriously disturbed by his failure to return at the time he was expected.

In a few words he recited the events of the last few hours and his belief that they were safe from further pursuit. Exclamations of immeasurable joy and relief rose from the troop.

"Still," Bomba reminded them, "we are not yet sure. Let us hasten and put all the distance possible between us and the Araks."

The slaves of Mendoza were rested now and refreshed, and the good news that Bomba had brought put new life into their veins. They pressed after him with ardor.

It was late that afternoon when Bomba's keen ears brought to him sounds that made him halt abruptly and order his followers to seek shelter behind anything they could find.

"There are men coming through the jungle," he said. "Many men. It may be that the braves of the Araks have made a circuit and got in front

of us. Be ready with your spears and arrows when Bomba gives the word."

The tread of feet came nearer, and at last what seemed to be the vanguard of a large company came in sight. A grizzled veteran strode at their head.

"Father!" came a scream of delight, and the next instant little Pirah broke from her hiding place and rushed into the arms of Hondura, chief of the Araos.

Bomba was close behind her, and a scene of indescribable joy followed as the Araos and the fugitives fraternized together.

There was Lodo, too, good Lodo, his usually stolid face wreathed with smiles as he greeted Bomba, Gibo, Ashati and Neram!

Explanations were quickly made. Lodo had been taken down with fever before he reached Hondura and had been delirious for days. When at last he recovered he made his way to the maloca and told of Pirah's capture. As soon as possible an expedition had been organized and had almost reached the Arak district when they met Bomba.

Many of the warriors were still hot with desire for revenge. But Bomba advised against it.

"Pirah is here and safe," he said. "Why press on further? Mendoza is dead. It was at his bidding that the Araks came to get slaves in the

lands of the Araos. They will probably never come again. There are already widows and orphans enough in the jungle."

It was a sane and humane argument, and it prevailed. The forces of Hondura set their faces homeward. They took the slaves along so that they might get well and strong in the maloca of Hondura. Afterward, if they wished, they could take up the journey to their own home tribes.

Hondura's gratitude to Bomba was beyond words. But the lad made little of his exploit.

"It is nothing," he said. "Little Pirah is like a sister to Bomba. Why should he not risk all to rescue her? But let Hondura tell Bomba this thing. How is Casson? Is he well?"

"The gods have been good to Casson," replied Hondura. "He is stronger than he has ever been since Hondura has known him. His mind, too, is not so sick as it was. He remembers many things and he talks much of one he calls Laura."

The boy's heart bounded. Remembers many things! Talks much of one he calls Laura!

"My mother!" he murmured, his eyes moist.

"Can Casson tell me where you are, my mother?"

The next Bomba story, volume IX, is entitled "Bomba on the Underground River."

BOMBA

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